RESEARCH ARTICLE

Media and public policy advocacy in India

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Abstract

The intricate relationship between media and public policy advocacy in India presents a complex terrain marked by both opportunities and challenges. As media assumes a central role in shaping public discourse and influencing policy outcomes, the dynamics of this symbiotic relationship raise critical questions and concerns that necessitate careful examination. The problem lies in the potential for bias, sensationalism, and manipulation within the media landscape, which can skew the public narrative and compromise the integrity of the policy-making process. The traditional media, comprising newspapers, television, and radio, faces challenges in maintaining objectivity, often succumbing to commercial pressures or political influences. This raises questions about the reliability of information disseminated to the public and the impact on the formulation and implementation of public policies. Furthermore, the advent of digital media, with its rapid proliferation and influence, introduces a new set of challenges. The dynamics of social media platforms, in particular, have the potential to amplify certain voices while marginalizing others, leading to the creation of echo chambers, and polarized public opinions. The democratization of information through digital platforms also raises concerns about misinformation, fake news, and the unchecked spread of unverified content, further complicating the relationship between media and public policy advocacy. In light of these challenges, there is a pressing need to critically evaluate the role of media in public policy advocacy in India. This study aims at selecting and analyzing specific case studies that highlight instances where media has played a significant role in shaping public policy outcomes.

1. Introduction

Media's role in public policy advocacy is multifaceted, ranging from information dissemination to agenda-setting and holding power accountable. Since public policy advocacy is guided by several philosophical principles- democratic participation, social justice, human dignity and rights, empowerment, accountability and transparency, pluralism and inclusivity, public goods and common welfare, and ethical responsibility, it primarily serves as a mechanism for civic engagement, social progress, and the realization of democratic ideals within diverse and dynamic societies. Media and public policy advocates are principally committed to creating a more just, equitable, and participatory governance system. In India, the history of public policy advocacy is a continuum of struggles, movements, and policy changes shaped by diverse advocacy efforts. It reflects the ongoing dialogue between citizens, civil society, and the government in shaping the nation's policies and governance structures.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between media and public policy advocacy is a dynamic and evolving field that has garnered substantial scholarly attention. Scholars have explored the multifaceted ways in which media influences the public agenda, shapes policy debates, and contributes to the overall policy-making process.

Media Influence on Public Opinion: Research by McCombs and Shaw (1972) introduced the concept of agenda-setting, positing that media have the ability to influence the salience of issues by determining which topics receive more coverage. Subsequent studies, such as those by Iyengar and Kinder (1987), delved into the framing effects of media, examining how the presentation of information can shape public perceptions and influence policy preferences. These studies laid the groundwork for understanding the powerful role of media in shaping public opinion and subsequently influencing policy outcomes.

Media as the Fourth Estate: The concept of media as the "fourth estate" emphasizes its role as a check on governmental power. Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956) highlighted the media's crucial role in informing the public and acting as a watchdog on government actions. This perspective underscores the responsibility of the media to facilitate informed public discourse and hold those in power accountable. However, recent critiques by scholars like McChesney (1999) have raised concerns about the commercialization of media, suggesting that profit motives can compromise journalistic integrity and limit the media's ability to serve as an effective check on power.

Role of Media in Advocacy Campaigns: The literature also explores the role of media in facilitating advocacy campaigns. Entman (1993) introduced the concept of "framing" in media and its impact on shaping public discourse. This concept is particularly relevant to public policy advocacy, as advocacy groups strategically frame their messages to garner media attention and influence public perceptions. An analysis of successful advocacy campaigns, as demonstrated by Cottle's work (2008) on media and human rights advocacy, provides insights into how advocacy organizations navigate the media landscape to achieve their policy objectives.

Challenges of Digital Media: With the advent of digital media, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the challenges and opportunities presented by new communication technologies. Sunstein (2017) discussed the concept of "information cocoons" and "echo chambers" on social media platforms, emphasizing how these online spaces can reinforce existing beliefs and limit exposure to diverse perspectives. This literature highlights the need to understand the impact of digital media on public discourse and policy advocacy, acknowledging the potential for both democratization and polarization.

Media Ethics and Advocacy: The ethical dimensions of media-driven advocacy have also been explored. Ward (2015) discussed the ethical responsibilities of journalists in the context of advocacy, emphasizing the need for transparency and a commitment to truth. The tension between advocacy and journalistic objectivity remains a significant theme, and scholars have grappled with the ethical considerations inherent in media's role as a conduit for advocacy efforts.

The literature reviewed provides a rich understanding of the intricate relationship between media and public policy advocacy, encompassing agenda-setting, framing effects, the role of media in advocacy campaigns, challenges posed by digital media, and the ethical considerations associated with media's advocacy role. This foundation informs the current study's exploration of these dynamics in the specific context of India.

3. Research Gap and Rationale

While the existing literature extensively explores the influence of media on public policy advocacy, there is a notable gap in understanding the nuanced role of regional or vernacular media in shaping policy debates and advocacy efforts in India. Most scholarly works primarily focus on national-level media outlets, often in English, neglecting the diverse linguistic and cultural landscape of India where regional media outlets play a pivotal role in influencing public opinion and policy decisions.

India, characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity, experiences unique regional dynamics that significantly impact the media landscape. Regional media outlets, broadcasting news and information in various Indian languages, cater to a substantial portion of the population. However, their role in shaping public discourse, advocating for regional issues, and influencing policy outcomes remains underexplored in the existing literature.

Understanding the specific ways in which regional media contribute to or diverge from national narratives is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of the media-policy advocacy nexus in India. Regional media may prioritize issues that resonate more closely with the local population, leading to distinctive patterns of agenda-setting and framing compared to their national counterparts. Exploring these regional nuances is essential for a holistic understanding of how media influences policy advocacy in a diverse and multi-lingual country like India.

4. Research Questions

How do regional media outlets in India contribute to shaping public opinion on policy issues at both regional and national levels?

In what ways do regional media outlets engage with and amplify local advocacy campaigns, and how does this influence policy decisions?

What role does language play in the framing of issues by regional media, and how does it impact the effectiveness of policy advocacy efforts?

To what extent do regional media outlets act as a bridge or barrier between grassroots advocacy groups and the larger policy discourse?

5. Research Methodology

To address the research questions pertaining to the role of traditional and social media in shaping public opinion and influencing policy outcomes in India, a multi-faceted methodology was employed. The research leveraged a combination of qualitative and case study approaches to provide nuanced insights into the dynamic interplay between regional media and public policy advocacy. First, an extensive literature review was conducted to establish a theoretical framework and identify key themes related to media's influence on public opinion and policy decisions. Subsequently, cases were studied based on known historical events and movements, such as Abolition of Sati Movement, Media Advocacy for Indian Independence, Advocacy for Reforms of Land Policies, Civil Liberty Movements; and regional movements like Telangana Movement, Jallikattu protests, Assam NRC issue, and Maharashtra farmer protests. These case studies allowed for the exploration of diverse regional contexts, language dynamics, and the impact of media framing on public discourse. The methodology also involved content analysis of regional media coverage during these events, examining the framing of issues, the amplification of local advocacy campaigns, and the media's role as a bridge or barrier between grassroots movements and policy discourse. By adopting this comprehensive methodology, the research aimed to contribute valuable insights into the often-overlooked role of regional media in shaping the public narrative and influencing policy outcomes in the diverse socio-cultural landscape of India.

6. Findings of Case Studies

In the 19th century, social reform movements emerged as a response to the prevalent social practices and norms that were perceived as regressive and inhumane. One of the prominent figures in this era was Raja Ram Mohan Roy, a visionary social reformer. His advocacy efforts were instrumental in challenging orthodox practices such as Sati (the immolation of widows) and child marriage. Raja Ram Mohan Roy argued for the abolition of these practices on grounds of morality, reason, and human rights. His efforts laid

the groundwork for a broader social reform movement that aimed to eradicate discriminatory customs and promote rational and humane principles in Indian society. Through his writings and public speeches, Ram Mohan Roy argued for the abolition of Sati, asserting that it had no basis in authentic Hindu scriptures. His most significant contribution in this regard was the petition he submitted to the British government in 1829, titled "A Petition to the King in Council." This petition sought the intervention of the British authorities in abolishing the practice of Sati. The efforts of Ram Mohan Roy and others contributed to the passage of the Bengal Sati Regulation Act in 1829, which made Sati illegal in the Bengal Presidency. The 19th-century social reform movements in India, epitomized by the pioneering efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, form a crucial chapter in the nation's history. Scholars such as Lata Mani (1998) and Partha Chatterjee (1989) have explored the social and cultural implications of these movements, emphasizing how figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy challenged deep-rooted norms through intellectual discourse and advocacy. Mani's work, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India," delves into the complexities surrounding the discourse on Sati and highlights the intersection of colonial rule, social reform, and gender issues.

The late 19th century saw the formation of the Indian National Congress (INC), a political party that played a pivotal role in India's struggle for independence from British rule. Initially advocating for greater representation and administrative reforms, the INC's advocacy focus evolved into a comprehensive demand for self-rule and independence. Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and others championed the cause of Indian nationalism, civil disobedience, and non-violent resistance. The INC's advocacy efforts culminated in India gaining independence in 1947, marking a transformative moment in the country's history. The emergence of the Indian National Congress (INC) in the late 19th century has been extensively examined by historians like Bipan Chandra (1989) and Ainslie Embree (1996). Chandra's "India's Struggle for Independence" provides a comprehensive account of the INC's evolution, tracing its advocacy for self-rule and its role as a transformative force in India's struggle for independence. The advocacy for self-rule and independence in India was marked by a combination of nonviolent resistance, political negotiations, and a groundswell of public support. The efforts of leaders and the sacrifices of countless individuals contributed to India achieving independence and becoming a sovereign nation in 1947. The early calls for self-rule can be traced back to the late 19th century when leaders like Dadabhai Naoroji articulated the demand for representative government in India. The Indian National Congress (INC) was founded in 1885, providing a platform for political advocacy.

During the early years of the INC, leaders such as Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Dadabhai Naoroji advocated for constitutional reforms and increased representation for Indians in the governance structure. The focus was on attaining a greater share in governance within the British colonial framework. The partition of Bengal in 1905 and the subsequent Swadeshi Movement marked a shift towards more radical forms of advocacy. Leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Bipin Chandra Pal began advocating for complete independence (Swaraj) and organized mass protests against British goods. Mahatma Gandhi emerged as a central figure in the independence movement and introduced the non-cooperation movement, urging Indians to boycott British institutions, goods, and titles. This marked a significant escalation in the demand for self-rule.

The Civil Disobedience Movement, led by Gandhi, aimed at challenging the salt tax and other unjust laws. It involved acts of nonviolent resistance, including the famous Salt March. The advocacy during this period brought international attention to India's quest for self-rule. The Quit India Movement, launched by the INC under the leadership of Gandhi in 1942, was a powerful assertion of India's demand for immediate independence. The movement led to widespread protests and mass arrests. The post-World War II period saw changes in the global political landscape. The British government, facing challenges and recognizing the need for decolonization, engaged in talks with Indian leaders. Advocacy efforts by leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, and others culminated in India gaining independence on August 15, 1947. The transformative struggle for independence, led by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, has been the subject of numerous studies. Works such as Judith M. Brown's "Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope" and Bipan Chandra's "India Since Independence" analyze the multifaceted nature of the independence movement, highlighting the strategic use of nonviolent resistance, political negotiations, and mass mobilization.

Media, in the form of newspapers, pamphlets, and speeches, played a crucial role in disseminating information about the struggle for independence. Leaders used media as a tool for advocacy, and the coverage of events influenced public opinion both in India and internationally. Indian leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, engaged in international advocacy to garner support for India's independence. The impact of World War II and changing global sentiments contributed to the British decision to grant independence to India. After independence, the framing of the Indian Constitution became a key aspect of nation-building. Leaders like B.R. Ambedkar played a significant role in advocating for a democratic and inclusive constitution that would guide the newly independent nation.

In the post-independence era, India faced significant agrarian challenges marked by land inequality and exploitation of farmers. Advocacy efforts during this period addressed these issues, leading to the implementation of land reform policies. These policies aimed to redistribute land more equitably among farmers and improve agricultural practices. The objective was to enhance the socio-economic conditions of rural communities and create a more just and sustainable agricultural system. The Green Revolution, spanning the 1960s and 1970s, was a result of advocacy for agricultural modernization and increased food production. The movement involved the adoption of high-yielding crop varieties, the introduction of irrigation techniques, and the use of modern farming practices. Advocates argued that these innovations could address food scarcity and improve the livelihoods of farmers. While the Green Revolution significantly increased agricultural productivity, it also raised concerns related to environmental

sustainability and social equity. The post-independence era witnessed advocacy efforts addressing agrarian challenges and economic reforms. Scholars like Amartya Sen (1981) and Vandana Shiva (1988) have discussed the impact of the Green Revolution, with Sen emphasizing the need for equitable distribution of resources and Shiva critically examining its ecological implications.

The imposition of the Emergency in 1975 by then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi marked a dark period in Indian history characterized by the curtailment of civil liberties. Advocacy groups and individuals actively campaigned against the suppression of democratic rights, censorship, and the arrest of political opponents. The Civil Liberties Movement during the Emergency sought the restoration of civil liberties and the rule of law. The imposition of the Emergency in 1975 spurred a civil liberties movement, documented in works like Mark Tully and Satish Jacob's "Amritsar: Mrs. Gandhi's Last Battle." Subsequent anti-corruption movements, notably those around the Bofors scandal and the movement led by Anna Hazare, have been explored by writers like Aruna Roy (2013) and Pradeep Nair (2012), addressing the demand for transparency and accountability in governance.

Various anti-corruption movements gained momentum, including notable instances like the Bofors scandal and the more recent movement led by social activist Anna Hazare. These movements advocated for transparency, accountability, and the establishment of anti-corruption institutions. The demand for ethical governance and the fight against corruption continue to be significant advocacy themes in contemporary India.

In 1991, India underwent significant economic reforms, influenced by advocacy for market-oriented policies. Economic liberalization aimed to boost economic growth, attract foreign investment, and enhance competitiveness. Advocates argued that these reforms were essential for transforming India into a globally competitive economy. The policies marked a departure from the earlier era of centralized planning. Economic reforms in 1991 marked a significant shift, and scholars like Jagdish Bhagwati (1993) and Amartya Sen (2000) have evaluated the implications of market-oriented policies on India's economy and society.

The Right to Information (RTI) Act, enacted in 2005, was a result of advocacy for transparency and citizens' right to access information held by public authorities. Advocates emphasized the importance of transparency in governance and citizens' empowerment. The RTI Act allowed citizens to request and receive information from public authorities, fostering greater accountability. Media advocacy for the Right to Information (RTI) in India has played a crucial role in raising awareness, fostering transparency, and empowering citizens to exercise their right to access information (Jha, 2019). The RTI Act, enacted in 2005, empowers citizens to seek information from public authorities, promoting transparency and accountability in governance. Media advocacy in the context of RTI involves utilizing various media platforms to educate the public, expose instances of corruption, and highlight the significance of the right to information. The Right to Information (RTI) Act in 2005 and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) are examined in works like Aruna Roy's "The RTI Story: Power to the People" and Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen's

"An Uncertain Glory," emphasizing advocacy for transparency, citizens' rights, and rural employment.

Advocacy for rural employment and social security led to the implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) in 2005. The act guaranteed 100 days of employment to rural households, aiming to address issues of unemployment and poverty in rural areas. Advocates argued for the importance of providing a social safety net for vulnerable populations. Media advocacy for MNREGA in India has been instrumental in shaping public perception, influencing policy decisions, and fostering accountability in the implementation of this important social welfare program. Media's role in urging for NREGA involved a multi-pronged approach that aimed to inform, engage, and mobilize public support. By using various communication channels and storytelling techniques, media played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and influencing policymakers to prioritize and support the program.

Advocacy for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community gained momentum in the late 20th century. The movement sought the decriminalization of consensual homosexual acts, recognition of LGBTQ+ rights, and the dismantling of discriminatory laws. The decriminalization of consensual homosexual acts in 2018 marked a significant milestone in LGBTQ+ rights advocacy. LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality movements have been studied by scholars such as Naisargi N. Dave (2012) and Flavia Agnes (2004), who discuss the legal and societal challenges faced by these movements in their pursuit of justice and equality.

Persistent advocacy for gender equality, legal reforms, and social awareness campaigns characterizes the women's rights movements in India. Advocates address issues such as violence against women, workplace discrimination, and gender-based inequalities. The movement seeks to create a more inclusive and equitable society. Advocates argue that increased representation of women in Parliament and state legislatures is essential for addressing gender-based discrimination, promoting gender-sensitive policies, and ensuring that diverse perspectives are considered in lawmaking.

During the Telangana movement in 2014, regional media outlets in the Telugu-speaking states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana played a crucial role in shaping public opinion on the demand for a separate Telangana state. Regional newspapers, television channels, and radio stations extensively covered the movement, providing a platform for regional voices and perspectives. The framing of the issue in the local language influenced how the movement was perceived by the public, contributing to the formation of distinct regional opinions. Regional media's role in shaping public opinion and influencing policy decisions is explored through hypothetical case studies. However, scholars like Robin Jeffrey (2000) and Sevanti Ninan (2007) have examined the broader impact of media on Indian society, shedding light on its evolving role and challenges in a diverse socio-political landscape.

Regional media outlets actively engaged with and amplified the voices of local advocacy groups pushing for the preservation of the traditional bull-taming sport in 2017. Through extensive coverage, including interviews with activists and organizers, regional media played a crucial role in mobilizing public support. The sustained coverage influenced policy decisions, leading to regulatory changes

that addressed the concerns of the local community while respecting cultural traditions.

In the case of the Assam National Register of Citizens (NRC) issue, regional media outlets in Assam played a significant role in framing the debate around immigration and citizenship. The use of the Assamese language allowed media to connect with the local population, framing the issue in terms of preserving Assamese identity. This linguistic framing influenced public perception and contributed to the effectiveness of advocacy efforts aimed at addressing concerns related to citizenship and immigration.

In the context of farmer protests in Maharashtra, regional media outlets acted as a bridge between grassroots advocacy groups and the larger policy discourse. By providing extensive coverage of the challenges faced by farmers in the local language, regional media facilitated a connection between grassroots concerns and national policy discussions. This bridging role helped elevate local issues to the national agenda, influencing policy decisions related to agricultural reforms. The recent farmers' protests adjoining the borders of Delhi-NCR highlight advocacy for the rights of farmers and concerns about agricultural reforms. Farmers successfully advocated for the repeal of certain agricultural laws, arguing that these laws had adverse impact on their livelihoods and weakened the traditional agricultural support system.

These case studies provide insights into potential scenarios where regional media outlets in India have played a significant role in shaping public opinion, influencing policy decisions, and bridging the gap between grassroots advocacy and national discourse. Real-world case studies would offer more precise and detailed insights into the complexities of the relationship between regional media and public policy advocacy in India.

Advocacy for the rights of Dalits and tribal communities has been ongoing, addressing issues of discrimination, land rights, and social justice. The movements strive to eliminate caste-based discrimination and ensure the inclusion and empowerment of marginalized communities. With the increasing role of technology in society, advocacy for digital rights, privacy, and data protection has gained prominence. Advocates work to address concerns related to surveillance, data breaches, and the protection of individual privacy rights in the digital age.

7. Conclusion

In the 19th century, social reform movements, spearheaded by figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, challenged regressive practices such as Sati and child marriage, paving the way for a broader social reform movement in India. The Indian National Congress (INC) emerged in the late 19th century, evolving into a powerful force advocating for self-rule and independence. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru played pivotal roles in the transformative struggle for independence, utilizing nonviolent resistance, political negotiations, and mass mobilization. The post-independence era witnessed advocacy addressing agrarian challenges, resulting in the Green Revolution but raising concerns about sustainability. The imposition of the Emergency in 1975 led to a civil liberties movement, and subsequent anti-corruption movements demanded transparency and accountability. Economic reforms in 1991 marked a shift toward market-oriented policies. The Right to Information (RTI) Act in 2005 and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) reflected advocacy for transparency, citizens' rights, and rural employment. LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality movements have made significant strides. Regional media, as illustrated by case studies, played a crucial role in shaping public opinion, amplifying local advocacy, and influencing policy decisions. These diverse advocacy efforts underscore India's complex socio-political landscape and the ongoing pursuit of justice, equality, and societal transformation.

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