

Media Response to Kashmir Conflict: How Press Differed in Highlighting Protest Shutdowns between 1990-2010

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Abstract : Kashmir has been a bleeding-spot in the South Asian politics since 1947 when the subcontinent was bifurcated into Hindu, India and Muslim Pakistan by the departing British colonisers. Kashmir couldn't accede to either of the two new-born, sovereign nations until tribal invasion from Pakistan forced an unfortunate change of events. India, driven by conditional accession signed by the Kashmir's last monarch, sent its army to defend Kashmir Valley, with a promise, made subsequently, that the region's fate would be decided by the natives through an internationally-monitored plebiscite. The country, however, broke its promise, choosing not to withdraw its military to allow the plebiscite, and, instead, strengthened its claim over Kashmir, which it later started describing as her integral part. War, fought in the shape of three and a half bloody battles, ensued between India and Pakistan, even as the United Nations' intervention managed a ceasefire as early as in the 1950s, though not before Kashmir had come to be divided into its India-controlled and Pakistan-controlled halves. Prolonged, the dispute over Kashmir took a violent turn in 1989-90 with the start of an anti-India armed rebellion. Kashmiris have been fighting for their right to self-determination, and bringing their own life to a grinding halt has been one of their preferred forms of protest against the Indian rule. This form of resistance is locally called 'Hartals', and recognised as shutdowns, which have often been prolonged and violent. Since 1989-90, the shutdowns have become only more frequent and forceful, and there are marked days on which Kashmir shuts down in protest every year, like a ritual. This paper is based on a study of how the Indian and Kashmir press covered the shutdowns observed in the troubled valley on four such days: January 26 (Indian Republic Day), February 11 (the day on which India executed a prominent Kashmiri resistance leader), August 15 (India's Independence Day), and October 27 (the day on which the Indian military has landed in Kashmir). The coverage given by the Indian and Kashmiri press to the shutdowns observed on these days has been studied using the multi-tier content analysis approach: 1) Difference in the number of shutdowns covered by the two section is looked at, 2) the placement of the stories in the two section of the press is analysed, 3) the discourse highlighted by the two section of the press is compared, and 4) the editorials written by the two section of the press about the shutdowns are analysed. The findings show the Indian and the local press have been focussing on the two, predictable extremes of the situation: the Indian press has favoured the state, while the Kashmir or the local press has focussed on the narrative opposing the state's. The difference is noticed in the quantitative as well as the qualitative aspects of their coverage.

Keywords : Indo-Pak tension, Kashmir conflict, protest shutdowns, South-Asian politics

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