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Whose Crisis is Newsworthy?

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Abstract

In this paper, a qualitative comparative analysis of media representation of three displacement events is performed: the Rohingya exodus out of Myanmar since 1978 to the present day; the Kashmiri Pandit displacement from the Kashmir Valley in 1989-1990; and the displacement of indigenous tribes called Adivasis from Bastar in Chhattisgarh state in India, 2005 to the present day. Based on the concepts of framing (Entman, 1993); agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972); critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995); and humanitarian communication studies (Cottle & Nolan, 2007), the paper examines a specially selected corpus of 54 articles published in 18 different sources, including international English press, national Indian press, regional Kashmiri Urdu, Chhattisgarhi Hindi, Myanmar Burmese, Bangladeshi Bengali, and West Bengal Bengali press. It concludes that the weight accorded to media salience cannot be measured by the scale of human tragedy but depends rather on the geometrics of geopolitical interest. This is evidenced by the findings of the study, which demonstrate an acute discrepancy in media framing in cases of the three displacement events under consideration and highlight vernacular proximate media as a source of greater humanitarian adequacy.

Keywords: media framing, critical discourse analysis, displacement, Rohingya, Kashmiri Pandits, Bastar, geopolitics, gatekeeping, humanitarian communication, vernacular press, agenda-setting.

Introduction and Background

This study begins not in a library but in a gap. The researcher grew up in Chhattisgarh, the state containing Bastar and yet the displacement of Adivasi communities unfolding nearby remained invisible: absent from newspapers, drawing rooms, and public consciousness. Later, working within the humanitarian communication ecosystem, the researcher encountered the Rohingya crisis. The contrast was disorienting not because Rohingya coverage was unwarranted, but because of what it illuminated by contrast: the silence surrounding Bastar, grown up beside yet never truly seen. The third strand came from close Kashmiri Pandit friendships-people who described leaving their homes in the night, years in Jammu migrant camps-whose experience was strikingly absent from newspaper archives, particularly international ones. This triangulated encounter generates the central question: why does media attention to displacement follow the

pattern it does? Positionality in qualitative research is a resource to be reflexively acknowledged, not a contamination to be controlled (Finlay, 2002).

Media coverage of forced displacement is not a mirror held up to human suffering; it is a curated selection shaped by newsroom economics, geopolitical alignments, and editorial ideology (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Cottle, 2009). The Rohingya crisis described by the UN as a 'textbook example of ethnic cleansing' (UN Human Rights Chief, 2017) displaced over 1.1 million people and attracted saturating international coverage. The Kashmiri Pandit displacement of 1989-1990, which drove an estimated 100,000-800,000 Pandits from the Kashmir Valley (Bose, 2003), received muted international attention despite its humanitarian scale. The displacement of Adivasi communities from Bastar, caught between Maoist insurgency and state counterinsurgency (2005-present), remains invisible internationally and barely visible nationally. These three cases constitute a comparative experiment in the political economy of humanitarian attention: they share structural features yet diverge dramatically in media salience.

Relevance and Scope

The study is built on the previous scholarship on displacement media by going beyond English language corpus to analyze vernacular media as an analytical site rather than an afterthought. This shows the limitations of using international vs. national dichotomy because the vernacular-national-international trichotomy exposes levels of visibility and invisibility unaccounted for in the English only analysis. There have been proven negative humanitarian implications resulting from media invisibility which include: less donor contributions, diplomatic inactivity and normalization of suffering (Seaton, 2005; Moeller, 1999) operating differently among the different linguistic groups. The corpus includes 54 articles from 18 news sources: international English (NYT, BBC, Al Jazeera); national Indian English (The Hindu, Times of India, Indian Express); vernacular Kashmiri (Kashmir Reader, Srinagar Times, Alsafa); vernacular Bastar (Deshbandhu, Haribhoomi, Bastar Junction, Bhumkal Samachar); Myanmar press (The Irrawaddy, Mizzima); Bangladeshi Bengali (Prothom Alo, Daily Star); and West Bengal Bengali (Anandabazar Patrika).

Objectives and Research Questions

Objective 1: Comparative analysis of discursive framing, construction of sources, and language construction of displaced people in relation to international, national, and vernacular outlet strata in all three crises.

Objective 2: Analysis of geopolitical, ideological, and structural factors such as national interests, diplomatic relations, gatekeeping functions of newspapers, access to news media which account for the differential media salience of each crisis and linguistic stratum.

Objective 3: Evaluation of the pattern of media coverage according to the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence (ICRC, 2004) and how this reveals itself in different coverage patterns by different linguistic strata.

Research Questions

RQ1: How does discursive framing vary between the three cases under comparative analysis of international, national, and vernacular press-and what are the intra-crisis differences between linguistic strata that indicate humanitarian narrative politics?

RQ2: What are the geopolitical and structural reasons behind the over-representation, selective reporting, and communicative exclusion in question?

RQ3: In what ways does vernacular media diverge from international and national media in its humanitarian adequacy and why?Bengal Bengali (Anandabazar Patrika)

Articles were sampled from four time periods: January 1990, 2005-2009, September 2017, and 2022-2024.

Review of Literature

According to Galtung & Ruge's (1965) theory of newsworthiness as an ideologically produced phenomenon based on cultural proximity, Moeller's (1999) theory of compassion fatigue, and Seaton's (2005) criticism of sensational crisis reporting, displaced people in Bastar will fail to meet the desensitization point because of lack of circulation within the mainstream. Similarly, through her theory of spectatorship of suffering, Chouliaraki (2006) proved how Western media transformed displaced people into objects by depoliticizing them; and Ibrahim's (2018) study of the Rohingyas proved how representation of high-salience events could be unjust representation.

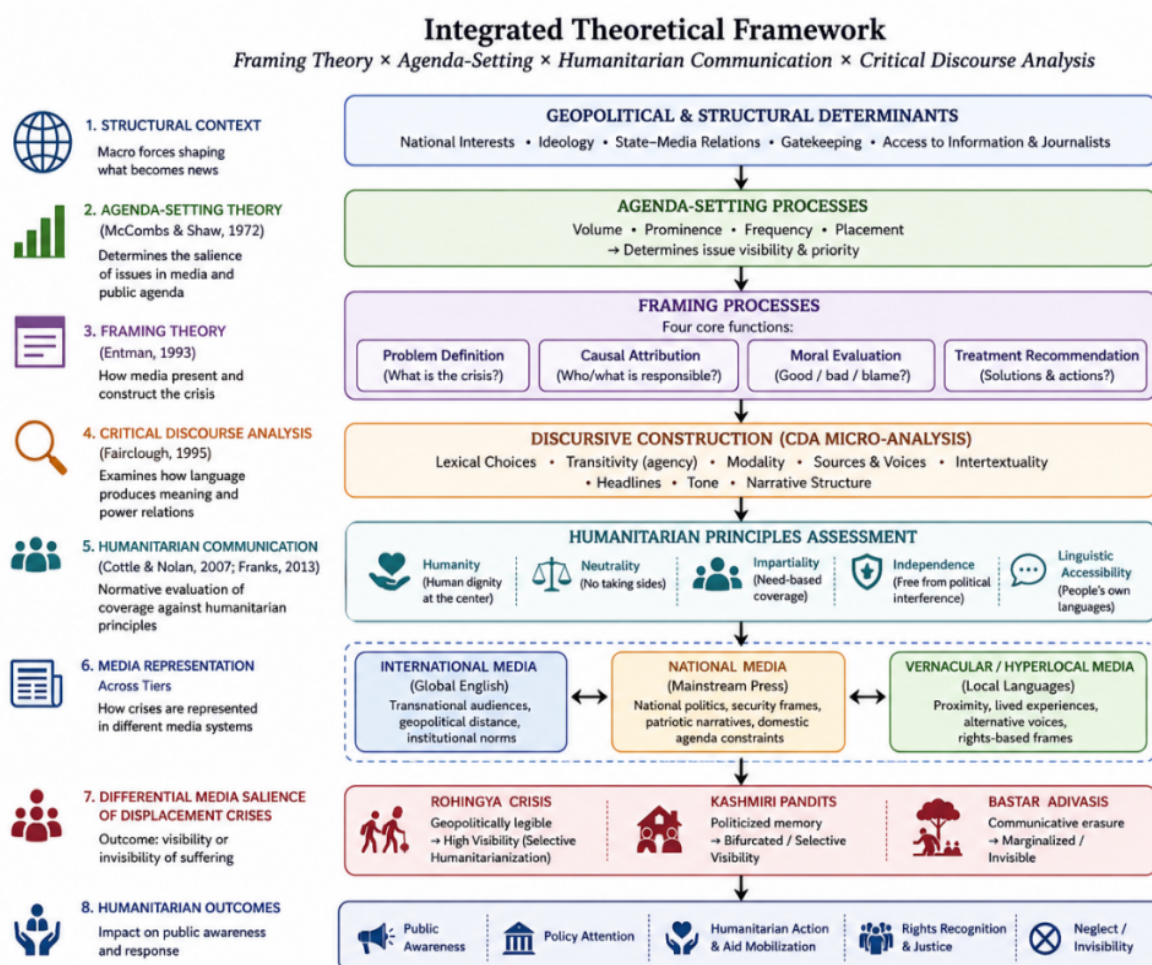
Propaganda Model, introduced by Herman & Chomsky (1988), was a theoretical framework for explaining how ownership, sources, and ideology mediate news to suit state interests. Thussu (2007) utilized the propaganda model for analyzing news media in South Asia and explained how Indian news outlets interpret the Kashmir situation through a lens of national security that neglects the humanitarian aspect. Zarni & Cowley (2014) argued that the information management in Myanmar-restricting the access to Rakhine and managing the narrative domestically-is an act of geopolitical mediation of the Rohingya crisis, not considered in international reporting. Sonwalkar (2004) maintained that Indian vernacular newspapers have greater total circulation than English broadsheets, constituting another sphere of media public that represents the crises differently than the English newspapers that dominate scholarly discussions. Amin (2015) analyzed how Kashmiri media outlets in Urdu language coped with both militant intimidation and state censorship. Similarly, Das (2019) found that local newspapers in Bastar are published under precarious conditions of danger and scarcity. Humanitarian Communication was defined by Cottle & Nolan (2007) as information practices facilitating humanitarian response, differentiating rights-based journalism from aid journalism creating dependency.

Table 1: Comparative Overview of Three Displacement Crises

Parameter	Rohingya	Kashmiri Pandits	Bastar Adivasis
Period / Scale	1978-present; 1.1 million+ displaced	1989-1990; 100,000-800,000 displaced	2005-present; 500,000+ est. displaced
Primary Driver	State ethnic violence / military	Armed insurgency + state response	Counterinsurgency & Maoist conflict
Int'l Media Salience	Very High (post-2017)	Low to Medium	Near Invisible
National Media (India)	Medium (security frame)	High (politicised)	Low (development/Maoist binary)
Vernacular/Proximate	Mixed-security-humanitarian tension	Bifurcated Urdu vs. Hindi press	Sparse; rights language in hyperlocal only
UN/UNHCR Involvement	Extensive	Limited	Minimal
Journalist Access	Severely restricted (Rakhine)	Restricted (AFSPA zones)	Severely restricted (conflict zone)

Theoretical Framework

The framing theory by Entman (1993) asserts that media select, highlight, and ignore certain aspects with regard to the construction of problems, causalities, judgments, and solutions. As such, displaced people will be either presented as victims of persecution, security risks, economic problems, or political pawns. Agenda-Setting Theory by McCombs and Shaw (1972) discusses the influence of volume on the salience of a particular subject matter to both individuals and government agencies, where second-level agenda-setting can be used to assess the different ways in which a particular crisis may be framed according to linguistic registers for different political groups. The Humanitarian Communication Framework by Cottle and Nolan (2007) and Franks (2013) is the normative evaluation framework to determine if the coverage complies with the standards of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, independence, and linguistic accessibility to ensure that people from affected areas receive information in their languages.



Methodology

The present study employs a qualitative mixed methods design that incorporates Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995), comparative case study methodology (Yin, 2003), and interpretive framing analysis (Entman, 1993; Van Gorp, 2007). In terms of selection criteria, the three crises are chosen on the grounds of theoretical purposiveness (Seawright & Gerring, 2008), in the sense that there is enough structural similarity to allow for comparison while simultaneously displaying significant differences on independent variables. The 54-article corpus is developed through theoretical purposive sampling, where 6 publications for each tier were selected, with 3 articles per publication, within 4 time periods. The sample size is based on preliminary findings indicating that theoretical saturation occurs around 48 articles, meaning that no new framing emerged after this number. Articles published in non-English language (Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Burmese) have been translated by bilingual research assistants, maintaining source language discourse markers for CDA purposes. The articles follow a four stage process consisting of macro-structural analysis (headlines, placement, and narrative architecture), CDA microanalysis (transitivity, lexis, modality, and intertextuality), cross-linguistic comparison (dialogue between articles from various registers of the same crisis), and compliance with humanitarian principles assessment.

Table 2: Publication Corpus-18 Outlets, 54 Articles, 6 Languages

Tier	Publications	Language	Crisis Focus	Articles
International	NYT, BBC Online, Al Jazeera English	English	All three	9
National Indian	The Hindu, Times of India, Indian Express	English	All three	9
Vernacular Kashmir	Kashmir Reader, Srinagar Times, Alsafa	Eng/Urdu	Kashmiri Pandits	9
Vernacular Bastar	Deshbandhu, Haribhoomi, Bastar Junction, Bhumkal Samachar	Hindi	Bastar	12
Myanmar Press	The Irrawaddy, Mizzima News	Burmese/Eng	Rohingya	6
Bangladeshi Bengali	Prothom Alo, Daily Star	Bengali/Eng	Rohingya	6
West Bengal Bengali	Anandabazar Patrika	Bengali	Rohingya	3
TOTAL	18 publications	6 languages	—	54

Data Analysis and Results

Rohingya: Geopolitically Legible, Linguistically Fractured

The coverage on international English utilizes a framework that attributes causal agency explicitly to the Myanmar military forces. In his account, NY Times' Jeffrey Gettleman stated that some military men had engaged in burning down villages, raping women, killing men and murdering children (NPR, October 2017). "Textbook example of ethnic cleansing" by the UN Human Rights Chief (September 11, 2017), was directly used by all news sources analyzed to describe a political situation, which is reduced to a simple statement of moral wrongdoing. Subsequently, Kristof of the NYT went further in describing the event using the expression "slow-motion genocide" (PBS NewsHour, March 2018). A transitivity analysis proves the thesis put forward by Chouliaraki (2006).

Myanmar's domestic media also mirrored the official 'clearance operations' discourse in its use of language that naturalised the actions of the Myanmar army by framing it in terms of cleaning or sanitising. According to The Irrawaddy, the two Reuters journalists were charged according to Article 3(1) of the Official Secrets Act of 1923 for 'news gathering with an intention to damage the safety and interest of the State' (December 2017) here the state was the main gatekeeper in criminalising journalism. In an interview with PM Hasina, Prothom Alo stated, 'Rohingyas are a huge burden for us' (February 2020), whereas according to the headline of the Daily Star, 'Rohingyas may be a threat for Bangladesh's security: FM' (June 15, 2017) securitisation came prior to the international humanitarian discourse, proving that proximity creates political sensitivities rather than adequate humanitarianism. Hindustan Times also domesticated this: 'Rohingyas are a threat to national security, integrity: RSS chief Bhagwat' (September 30, 2017) and 'Rohingya refugees are a security threat: Govt's affidavit' (September 15, 2017).

Kashmiri Pandits: Bifurcated Visibility, Politicised Memory

The single most important vernacular text of the Kashmiri Pandit corpus is the *Alsafa* headline dated April 14, 1990: "Kashmiri Pandits who are responsible for forcing Muslims should leave the valley in two days" (supported through testimony in Kashmir Forum; *The Quint*, March 2022). CDA demonstrates how the *Alsafa* employs the discourse to place the blame on the victims themselves, creating a discourse where the displaced are responsible for their own displacement. This indicates the complexities associated with the belief that proximate press is necessarily more humane. However, not all texts from *Alsafa* are alike; one of them is the letter written by 23 Kashmiri Pandits to 'a leading Urdu daily,' stating that "the Kashmiri Pandit community was made a scapegoat by Jagmohan and other vested interests" (*Deccan Herald*, cited from the recovered document).

National Indian English discourse on displacement instrumentalizes the 1990 event as a reference point in politics. This is evident in headlines such as 'Spurt in Killings: Kashmiri Pandits Fear 1990 Re-Run, Want to Shift,' (*The Tribune*, October 8, 2021), and 'Don't Let 1990 Repeat Itself in Kashmir' (Congress leader Manish Tewari, *The Tribune India*, October 2021), both of which use humanitarian memory in legislative discourse. The term '1990 re-run' implies a recurrence of the phenomenon as a natural occurrence that eliminates any structural reasoning. In international discourse (*NYT*, *BBC*) during 1990, an equivalency fallacy was used.

Bastar: Communicative Erasure and the Vocabulary of Dispossession

The most important result analytically derived from the Bastar corpus relates to language: the term 'displacement' does not feature much in Indian media coverage of this issue. *The Times of India* reports on 'Maoists Looking at Armed Overthrow of State' (March 6, 2010)-no Adivasis here as subjects. The 'Activists Protest Displacement of Tribals' by the *Deccan Herald* requires an intervening civil society protest before the problem becomes news worthy at all. *Frontline's* article, 'Nowhere People' (May 6, 2022), names the process semantically. Meanwhile, *Al Jazeera's* 'Displacement Fuels India Rebellion' (May 28, 2010) describes the displacement of Adivasis as one of the causes of insurgency-a framing that precludes responsibility (Iyengar, 1991). *Deshbandhu* chief editor Lalit Surjan confessed that Bastar reporters 'have no option but to talk to the Maoists and be arrested' (*Outlook India*, January 2024)-a case of the 'multi-level gatekeeping' by Shoemaker and Vos (2009).

It becomes clear in comparison to the hyperlocal press. While using the Hindi terms 'visthapan' and 'bedakhali', *Bhumkal Samachar* and *Bastar Junction* frame displacement as a rights issue, not as an issue with the development process. As Butler notes (2004), this is an example of grievability being unequally distributed. In this case, grievability was present in Hindi, in hyperlocal contexts, in the face of journalistic repression, in publications that many media scholars will never have read.

Table 3: Verified Discursive Examples-Headlines, Frames, Humanitarian Assessment

Outlet	Verified Headline / Statement (Date)	Frame	Humanitarian Principle Violated
NYT (via NPR, Oct 2017)	Gettleman: army 'burned villages, raped women, executed men, murdered children'	Diagnostic-humanitarian	Independence (aligns with US diplomatic position)
UN / Int'l outlets	'Textbook example of ethnic cleansing'-UN HR Chief (Sept 11, 2017)	Institutional anchor	—
Hindustan Times (Sept 30, 2017)	'Rohingyas are a threat to national security, integrity: RSS chief Bhagwat'	Security intruder /	Humanity, Impartiality
Hindustan Times (Sept 15, 2017)	'Rohingya refugees are a security threat: Govt's affidavit'	State security	Humanity, Neutrality
Prothom Alo English (Feb 2020)	'Rohingyas are a huge burden for us'-PM Hasina	Burden security /	Humanity, Impartiality
Daily Star Bangladesh (Jun 15, 2017)	'Rohingyas may be a threat for Bangladesh's security: FM'	Security	Humanity
Alsafa Urdu (Apr 14, 1990, transl.)	'Kashmiri Pandits responsible for duress... should leave Valley within two days'	Blame-the-victim	All four principles
Deccan Herald (citing 1990 letter)	Pandits to Urdu editor: 'community was made a scapegoat by Jagmohan'	Counter-narrative	Partial recovery
Tribune India (Oct 8, 2021)	'Kashmiri Pandits fear 1990 re-run, want to shift'	Political-retrospective	Independence
The Irrawaddy (Dec 2017)	Reuters reporters charged: 'news gathering to damage safety of the State'	State gatekeeping	Independence totally suppressed
Times of India (Mar 6, 2010)	'Maoists looking at armed overthrow of state' [Bastar]	Security / Maoist	Humanity (Adivasis absent)
Outlook India / Deshbandhu (Jan 2024)	Editor Surjan: Bastar journalists 'don't have any choice'-face arrest	Gatekeeping admission	Independence
Al Jazeera English (May 28, 2010)	'Displacement Fuels India Rebellion' [Bastar]	Prognostic / conflict	Impartiality
Frontline (May 6, 2022)	'Nowhere People'-Adivasis facing double displacement	Partial humanitarian	Humanity (partial)

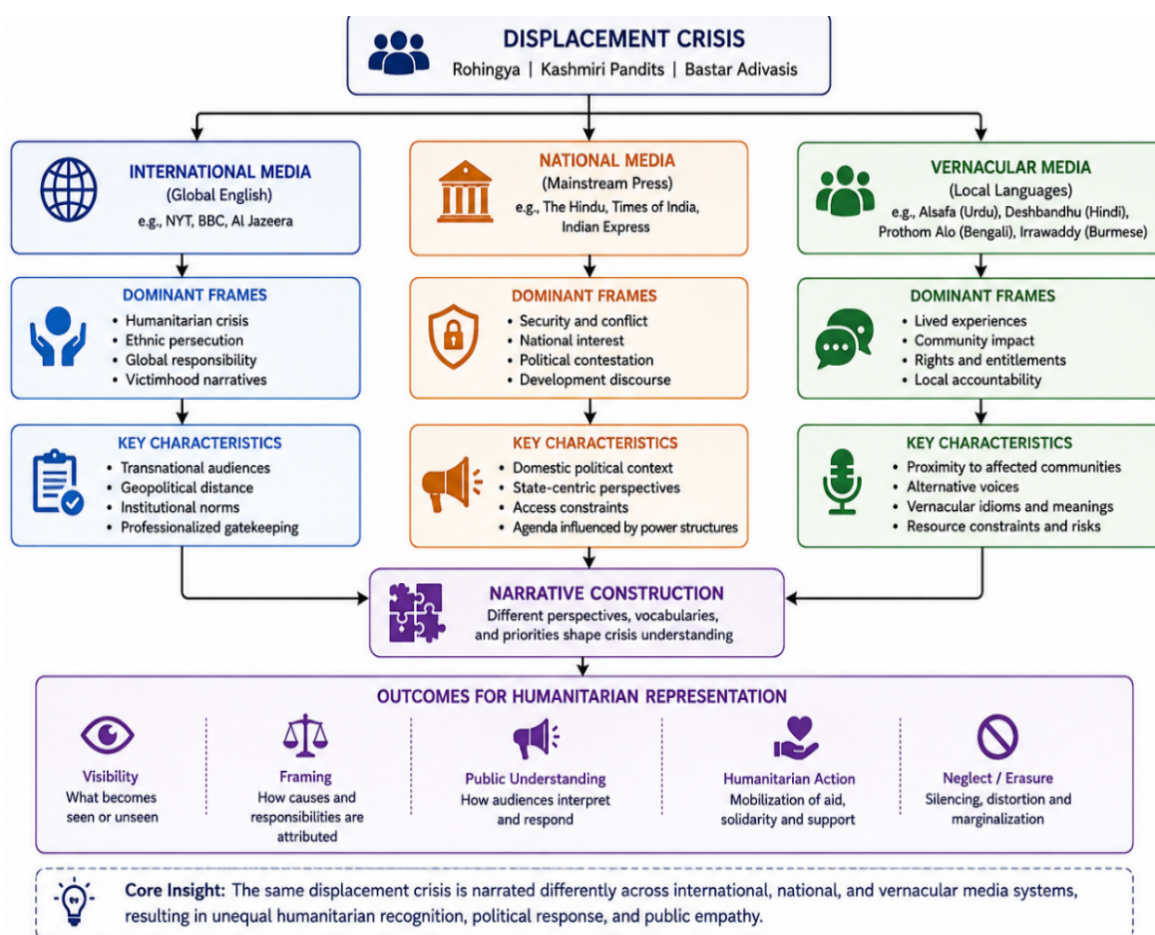


Figure: Multilingual media ecology of displacement reporting

The figure illustrates how different linguistic media systems construct distinct narratives around the same humanitarian crisis.

Discussion

There are three structural trends emerging from the results. They are: i) The Distance-Salience Paradox: Nearness does not mean better humanitarian adequacy, but the near media are almost always the only media covering the crises; and the Bastar press and Urdu Kashmiri press generate the most human rights language because of their institutional environment, which requires nuanced language that cannot be captured within the securitized national context. ii) Language-Ideology Interrelationships: the security language used in Prothom Alo reflects the refugees' issues in Dhaka; Hindi national media language reflects the security context in New Delhi; Deshbandhu reflects the security discourse in Raipur's political economy. iii) The Instrumentalization Cycle: Coverage spikes for all three crises are due to politics, not the crises.

The example of Rohingya indicates how humanitarian communication norms may be violated despite high salience if the media is working according to diplomatic needs of the West in disregard of the needs of Rohingya people. The case of Kashmiri Pandits exemplifies how political struggle overrides the humanitarian memory, where both the Hindutva and secularist perspectives end up in one thing-displacement of humanitarian concern through politicization.

The example of Bastar is an absolute failure for humanitarian communication since CDA clearly indicates how communicative dispossession takes place lexically and transitively.

This is an elaboration of the “propaganda model” proposed by Herman and Chomsky in their 1988 book: while the process of “flak” functions differently depending on the medium involved—criminal cases in Burma, violence in Bastar, editorial philosophy in Hindi-language national newspapers—its effect is uniformly the same. Sonwalkar’s “methodological nationalism” (2004), which critiques the field of media studies, deliberately obscures the places where more humanitarian journalism occurs because those are in non-Western languages

Limitations and Way Forward

Constraints of this research include: translation dependence (as Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, and Burmese texts depend on bilingual contacts; CDA conducted by native speakers will enrich the discussion); depth of corpus (as three articles in each publication reveal general trends but not consistent ones); broadcast media exclusion (television, being the dominant media genre in India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, falls out of the scope of the study); lack of social media sources (such as Facebook in Myanmar and WhatsApp news groups in Bastar); and incomplete hyperlocal Bastar archives due to digitization gaps. Further research should incorporate the use of multilingual corpus in media beyond print through multimodal discourse analysis, use of LDA for topic modelling and sentiment analysis in multilingual corpora, and participatory media audits involving displaced communities to produce emic approaches to framing.

Conclusion

As this paper has demonstrated through its multilingual qualitative analysis of 54 articles across 18 sources in six languages, the politics of displacement mediation lie in the structure, system, and linguistic differentiation of that politics. Crises can be invisible in English but partially visible in Urdu; rights-focused in hyperlocal Hindi but invisible in national Hindi; humanitarianized in exile Burmese but distorted in domestic Burmese.

The geography of which crises are covered by whom in which language in what way is precisely an indication of the geopolitics of institutional embedding. Humanitarian organisations should be careful not to confine their media outreach to English sources; vernacular press not only constitutes a different public sphere but, in many cases, better humanitarian journalism as well. The three exoduses discussed in this paper—the Rohingya, Kashmiri Pandits, and Bastar Adivasis—all need to bring to scholars' attention the whole multilingual field of humanitarian recognition, contestation, and invisibilisation, since the question that underlies them all is the same one that Butler (2004) asks: whose lives are grievable?

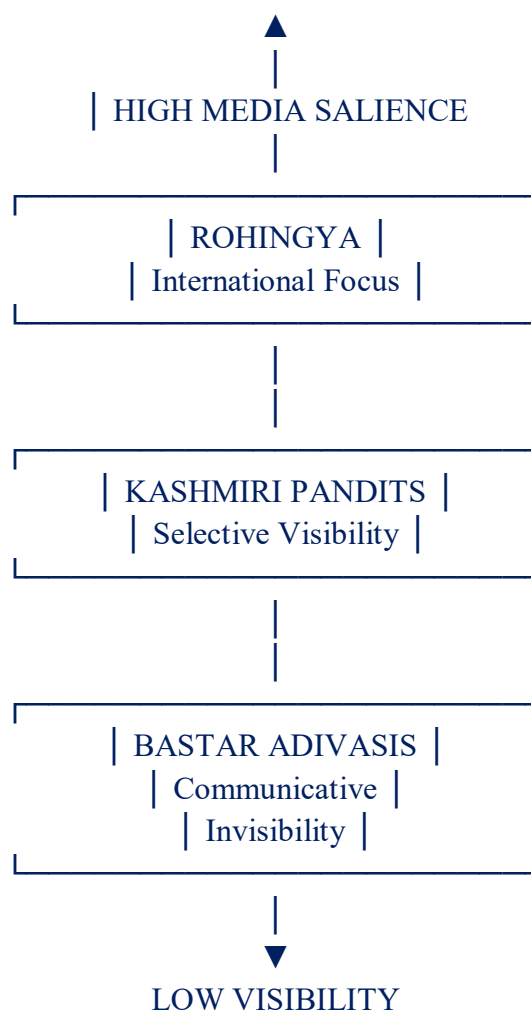


Figure: Hierarchy of media visibility across the three displacement crises

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