Indian Ocean Tsunami in Indian Media

Gopalan Ravindran[14]

Abstract

Tsunami entered the public sphere in India as a word that evokes unprecedented calamity after December 26 2004 when the Indian Ocean *Tsunami* caused massive devastation in the coastal districts of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. Tamil Nadu was the worst affected state with more than 7000 deaths. Even though, *Tsunamis* of higher magnitudes washed away large chunks of ancient Tamil Nadu, according to references in *Sangam literature*[15] the 2004 Tsunami's social, cultural and economic implications warrant a closer and critical study. In particular, the characteristics and implications of the manner in which the Indian media dealt with the disaster require a critical examination. This paper examines the same with a view to uncover the merits and demerits of the approaches adopted by Indian media towards the 2004 Indian Ocean *Tsunami*.

Keywords : Indian Ocean Tsunami, Indian Media, Tamil Nadu, Rational and Fictionalised Narratives, Violations of Privacy, Benevolence

Introduction

The Indian Ocean *Tsunami* hit the Eastern and Western coasts of India on the morning of December 26 2004. The worst affected state was Tamil Nadu and its worst affected district was Nagapatinam. According to official reports in January 2005, 7,707 people died in Tamil Nadu and 5,819 people died in the district of Nagapatinam. One of the worst affected cities was Chennai. Chennai has the world's second longest beach. On that fateful day, many children were playing cricket and other games and they became victims when giant waves struck the Marina beach. 206 people died in Chennai alone. According to Bharathi, the President of *South Indian Fishermen's Welfare Association,* the government, media and NGOs were unprepared for the disaster and were responding slowly in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. Said Bharathi (2016), "Tsunami was unexpected and when it hit the fishing communities, it was a disaster. Piles of bodies were waiting to be buried. Govt did not act for three days. Media did report the magnitude of disaster. But it was disrespectful to the privacy of the dead persons by showing women and children's bodies in close up, some time hanging

---

[14]Professor/Head, Dept.of Journalism and Communication, University of Madras, India.

[15] *Sangam literature* refers to the earliest available ancient Tamil literature (2381 poems on the domains of love and heroism by 473 poets) that belongs to the last of the three *Sangams* (Academies). The third *Sangam* period covers 300 BC – 300 AD. The works made possible by the first two academies were lost during the earlier periods when unprecedented deluge washed away large parts of the Tamil country.

down from trees. They were reporting the disaster, but in violation of ethical limits of reporting."

The Indian Ocean *Tsunami* and the Indian Media Disaster: News without "Objective Criteria"

According to Walter Lippmann (1922/1927), the "objective criteria" is an important arbiter of news. Walter Lippmann wanted the "objective criteria" to succeed for the wellbeing of the citizens and their relationship with institutions in society. This was not to be in his times and this is not to be in our times, particularly in countries like India and during times of disasters like the 2004 *Tsunami*. According to Lippmann, another important parameter of news is it must "signalise the event". In the case of the coverage of the Indian Ocean *Tsunami,* this happened, but happened badly, to say the least, in terms of the parameters of the coverage given by Indian media, particularly the vernacular newspapers in the worst affect state of Tamil Nadu.

Indian media includes, besides television, films and radio, its dominant category, Indian press. At last count, there are hundreds of FM radio stations, Public Service Broadcaster, *All India Radio's* stations and nearly 900 television channels, besides the Indian film industry which produces more than 1000 films every year. Indian Press is the familiar tag for relating to India's newspapers, magazines and other periodicals. *The Registrar of Newspapers for India* (RNI) reports in its 2015-16 report that there are 16,136 newspapers in the total list of publications of 110,851. The growth percentage was 5.13% over the previous year (www.rni.nic.in).

But these wide spectrum of Indian media have the propensity for violating the dictum of Walter Lippmann's "objective criteria" not because they glamour for it, but because of their cultural legacies. One important cultural attribute of public communication through media is the dominance of orality *vis a vis* print-based literacy. The second important attribute is the power of epic narratives in their fictionalised and non-fictionalised versions in Indian media. We can see their power and influence in the popularity of Indian films and the popularity of television serials as well as in the success of newspapers which have institutionalised them *vis a vis* newspapers which want to follow Western modes of news narratives. *Dina Thanthi,* the popular newspaper in Tamil has institutionalised both the attributes as news gathering and news reporting practices and remains *numero uno* because of the same.

Ravindran (2015) argued that the local cultural norms are the primary definers of the characteristics of the different sections of the Indian press. He remarked: "the characteristics of the different constituents of Indian press underscore the primacy of the local cultural norms as the primary definers of their characteristics even as the tendencies to follow the universal norms of journalism are in place, *albeit* ephemerally. Undoubtedly, this makes the individual entities in the canvas of the Indian press more local and less-pan Indian; more discursive and less homogenous. In the process, the canvas itself turns out to be a misnomer."

This paper takes as its theoretical framework Walter Lippmann's conceptions of news, news event and the objective criteria. According to Walter Lippmann, as mentioned earlier, news is news because of its "objective criteria". News is news because of its potential to signalise the event as the news event.   In his frameworks, contained in his three famous works on journalism and public opinion (*Public Opinion, Liberty and News and Phantom Public*), he clearly argues the cause of a democratic and eventful relationship between media, citizens and the modern society. Said Lippmann: "The hypothesis, which seems to me the most fertile, is that news and truth are not the same thing, and must be clearly distinguished. The function of news is to signalise an event, the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act. Only at those points, where social conditions take recognisable and measurable shape, do the body of truth and the body of news coincide. …Therefore on the whole, the quality of the news about modern society is an index of its social organisation. The better the institutions, the more all interests concerned are represented, the more issues are disentangled, the more objective criteria are introduced, the more perfectly an affair can be reported as news."

This paper seeks to see the coverage of the Indian Ocean *Tsunami*   by the Indian media as a relationship that is an index of social organisation where, as Lippmann says "all interests concerned are represented, more issues are disentangled, more objective criteria are introduced, more perfectly an affair can be reported as news. With is in perspective, this paper locates and co-locates the following as the salient characteristics of the Indian media's relationship with the Indian ocean *Tsunami*.

I)   Fictionalising Disaster Narratives
II) Violations of Privacy - Insensitive Photojournalism
III) Memorialising Indian Ocean *Tsunami* through epic/emotional narratives and rational/false narratives
IV) Constructing acts of *Benevolence* by the State and NGOs as News.
V) Media Coverage in the Pre-Social Media and Pre-24 Hour News Channels Age

Fictionalising Disaster Narratives

One of the dominant tendencies of the Indian media, particularly its vernacular wing is the propensity to fictionalise news or cultivate partisan news narratives. As per the tenets of journalism of the Western kind, fictionalising narratives is an act that is seen as antithetical to the tenets of journalism. Journalism is a derivative of the more than 400 year old print culture in India and it is still struggling to compete with the tenets of the strong oral culture. Epic narratives are the hall mark of Indian oral culture and they have permeated the domains of journalism with ease. Epic narratives also militate against the rational narratives and "objective criteria" which seek to convey news as news without invoking the tools of

emotions laden storytelling for news presentation.

The Indian Ocean *Tsunmai* was not a natural disaster for many of the Tamil newspapers. They sought to portray it as a monster with a human personae. The relationship between the disaster as a news event and the newspapers was subverted in the process through the deployment of stories that were anchored by headlines such as "The waves that were sleeping silently became very angry that day and rose higher" (*Dinamalar*). Another Tamil daily, *Dina Thanthi* headlined on 26 Dec.2014, "People Came to Realise that there was a cruel monster, Tsunami, when it gathered and swallowed hundreds and thousands of people".

Violations of Privacy - Insensitive Photojournalism

The photos of the victims of 9/11 did not appear either in the media of USA or other countries. But the close up shots of the victims of *Tsunami* 2004 appeared in a gruesome manner in Indian media, particularly the vernacular newspapers. Such a senseless coverage killed the victims and their living ones many a time. Some photojournalists even prided themselves for winning award for their photographs. The absence of a media regulator in India is one of the fundamental reasons for the insensitive practices of photojournalism during times of disaster. Mr Sheikh Thawood, a local fishermen was aghast when he said: "*Tsunami* was covered not in the manner befitting the ethical standards of journalism. There were not many television channels as they are now. But the media were violating the victims' privacy in a shocking manner. These violations could have been avoided. *Tsunami* was a natural disaster that was also a media disaster in this respect" (2016).

Memorialising Tsunami : Emotional/Epic Narratives and Rational/False Narratives

Emotional/Epic Narratives

There is an interesting theoretical take on memorialising rhetoric as a material marker in the growing body of literature on material rhetorics. The work of Dickinson (2010) is of particular relevance in this paper which seeks to see the manner in which the public sites of Indian media sought to memorialise a natural disaster, the Indian Ocean *Tsunami.* Majority of Indian newspapers have been engaging in memorialising the Indian Ocean 2004 *Tsunami* and its victims almost every year. The vernacular newspapers, particularly Tamil newspapers are known for churning out emotional narratives and fictionalised headlines on the eve of *Tsunami* anniversaries. *Dinamalar*, for instance, had this headline, on 25 Dec.2016. "Tsunami that Gathered and Gobbled Up in its Mouth". On 26 Dec.2014, the same paper had this headline: "The *Tsunami* That Swallowed the Lives of 228,000 Lives…" Another leading Tamil daily, *Dina Thanthi*'s words were no different. It headlined on 26 Dec.2014, "People came to realise that there was a cruel monster, *Tsunami*, when it gathered and swallowed hundreds and thousands of people." It had the classical epic narrative form. This story is about the Tenth anniversary of *Tsunami* tragedy. But this story adopts the epic narrative form in that

it does not talk about the anniversary to begin with, rather it recapitulates the tragic events that befell people when *Tsunami* struck Tamil Nadu. It seeks to attribute a monstrous personae to the natural disaster when it said: "The waves that rose up in Chennai's marina beach gobbled up people, shops and things and dragged them inside the sea."

On the other hand, the English mainstream dailies such as *Times of India* had a different approach when it sought to memorialise the tragedy. For instance, on 26 Dec.2018, *Times of India* had a plain headline, "*Tsunami* Fourth Anniversary." for its photo essay on women offering prayers to sand replicas of victims on the city's marina beach, where many perished on that day, particularly children playing cricket and other games.

Rational/False Narratives

Dinamani, a Tamil daily had this story on 04 09 2016: "04 09 1596: The Date when *Tsunami* Struck Japan for the first time." The headline seems false, compared to the content which says that it was the date when the first recorded *Tsunami* hit *Kyushu* coast in Japan. This proves the carelessness in the journalistic practice, editing, when it comes to disaster reporting by Indian media.

As is their wont, Indian newspapers also capitalised on the event by bringing out special books and contacting the celebrities to launch them or promote them. A well known case in this respect was the special *Tsunami* book brought out by *Times of India* to mark the first anniversary. Its edition on 25 Dec. 2005 had this headline: "Tsunami Anniversary: President APJ Abdul Kalam Speaks." It said : We didn't want to revisit the death and destruction; we wanted to look at the positives emerging from this *tandava* — death and birth form the continuum of life, don't they?. It quoted the man who is regarded as the People's President of India, Dr APJ Abdul Kalam.

"You see, the media has covered the *tsunami* quite exhaustively. But it has focused on the devastation, on death and destruction. I have followed the aftermath of the tsunami very closely. I have seen how people are rebuilding their lives. I am from Tamil Nadu and I am familiar with these people. One thing that has struck me is the response of people a few kilometres away from the shore, who were not affected by the monster wave. Do you know what was their first reaction? They rushed to the affected areas with food, clothes and medicines. This is in sharp contrast to what happened recently when riots broke out (in another part of the world) in the wake of a natural calamity. Perhaps not everything is right with India, but it has some positive civilisational values. I think this is one of them — our ability to come to the help of those afflicted."

Media Coverage in the Pre-Social Media and Pre-24 Hour News Channels Age

Looking back on the coverage from the vantage point of social media and 24 hour news channels, it is apparent that the absence of the social media probably was a handicap in

disaster communication during the last *Tsunami* days. Going by the recent experience of Dec 2015 Chennai floods, when youth of the city were mobilised and inspired by the messages on social media in their historical work in saving lives, providing relief to people, the presence of social media during the last *Tsunami* could have provided better communication means and relief efforts. The absence of 24 hour news channels can be read as a positive as the same did not provide what the social media provided. Moreover, the sensationalising tendency of the 24 hour Indian Television channels would have created a havoc of violations of privacy of the dead individuals.

Constructing Acts of *Benevolence* by the State and NGOs as News

This paper examines the acts of benevolence that emanated from the sides of the State, NGOs and media from a critical theory perspective. The notions of benevolence and benevolent subjectivity have been serving as important theoretical constructs in relating to the conditions of *subalterneity* in diverse cultural contexts. Gayatri Spivak's theoretical addresses (Landry and MacLean, 1996) concerning the above have elevated the purportedly centuries-old feudal marker of benevolence into a post colonial marker *par excellence*. This seems not only a theoretically sound mode of understanding the conditions of *subalterneity* and their sources, but a pragmatic one as well, particularly in the post colonial contexts of countries like India. The markers of post coloniality in such contexts are as widely populated as the subaltern groups and their detractors. The public spheres in which these divergent markers of post coloniality are made visible and influential are structured by the subaltern groups and their detractors in an intensely collaborative mode. One such public sphere is Tamil cinema. This is the plane where celebrity colonialism finds its subaltern subjects, the Tamil film fans. This is the plane where the formation of *subalterneity* hinges more upon the formation of benevolent subjectivities of the stars and super stars of Tamil cinema than the real world conditions in which subalterns find themselves.

The rhetoric of benevolence, kindness and solidarity was in the air in the days after *Tsunami* for a few years. It was the first major disaster in the post-Independent India on the east coast of India, particularly in states like Tamil Nadu. It was the first disaster in the age of modern globalisation. This particular nature of *Tsunami* 2004 had the three salient markers of benevolence, kindness and solidarity in the rhetoric of the media agenda, state agenda and the NGO's agenda. But how these translated into real benevolence, kindness and solidarity is a moot question. According to Shiekh, a fisherman from Pazhaverkadu fishing region, the NGOs contributed in both positive and negative terms. He said, "A few aid agencies did good work, in providing relief to the affected people. But many profited. For example, one agency approached our village for setting up a relief camp on long term basis and they wanted 3 cents land. Now they are owning 30 cents in our village. They did nothing. We are unable to get back the land. Women, who were inside their homes, could come out in the open, thanks to aid agencies who provided them means of empowerment. The arrival of fibre boats with the

aid agencies changed the practices we were used to and our relationship with the sole means of fishing for several decades and centuries, the wooden boat. Now the landscape is filled with fibre boats. They are not good in the tropical environment and bodies become hot in the hot weather sailing these fibre boats. They also remain wet throughout. Wooden boats are different, they are not hot, they do not topple and they are not wet always. School children have grown in number, thanks to the Govt. initiatives after *Tsunami*."

There were three kinds of acts of benevolence as exhibited by the State and NGOs. The State agencies wanted to be the sole players in reaching out to the families affected with aid. In one instance, *Dinakaran* reported on 01 Jan.2005 the ban by the Tamil Nadu government on NGOs distributing aid directly. The second kind of benevolence is when the party leader who presides over the government as Chief Minister wants to be the only person who can be benevolent and guarantor for the bright future lives of the victims' families. On 22 Dec.2004, *Dinakaran* reported the benevolent message of the Chief Minister, Ms Jayalalitha: "Do Not Worry About Your Future."

She was repeating this again, according to another Tamil daily, *Malai Malar* (31 Dec.2004), "No One Should Worry About Anything". The third kind of benevolence was exhibited by those who were insiders in media trade. The most notable of the insiders were film and television stars. They often exhibit their love for helping out the needy and those who are affected by disasters. But, they ironically take recourse to collecting money from people rather than putting their wealth for public good. Their act of benevolence is the most dubious. *Dinamalar* had this headline on 01 Jan.2004, "Film Actors and Actresses Collect Donation".

Conclusion

This paper argued that Indian media failed the test of Walter Lippmann's "objective criteria" and his call for relating to the relationship between news media and events as a site of a positive social organisation. The paper located and co-located the five characteristics of Indian media in their relationship with the Indian Ocean *Tsunami.* This paper acknowledges the need for divergent theoretical frameworks to engage with disaster communication.

References

Bharathi. K.
   2016. *Personal Interview.* September 27, 2016.
Dickinson, Greg, Blair, Carole and Ott.Brian
   2010. *The Places of Public Memory:The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials,* University of Alabama Press.
Landry, Donna and MacLean, Gerald
   1996. *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,* Literary

Criticism.

Lippmann, Walter,

    1922. *Public Opinion,* Harcourt, Brace and Co., NY.

    1927. *Phantom Public, Macmillan,* NY,

Ravindran, Gopalan

    2015. "The 2014 Indian Election and Partisan and Fictional Narratives in the Tamil Language Press" in Thorsen, Einar and Sreedharan, Chindu (Ed.), *India Election 2014: First Reflections*, Bournemouth University.

Sheikh, Thawood

    2016. *Personal Interview,* September 27 2016.

The Registrar of Newspapers for India (RNI), www.rni.nic.in