



Media Representation of the 18th SAARC Summit: Comparing Newspaper Coverage in Member Nations.

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ABSTRACT

Based on the qualitative content analysis of the leading English dailies in South Asia and in-depth interviews of journalists, this research paper analyses the role of print media in defining SAARC and, therefore, in contributing to the production and reproduction of social representations of SAARC in the public sphere. The research concentrated on coverage of 18th SAARC Summit held on 26-27 November, 2014 at Kathmandu, Nepal. The study is theoretically informed by news production theory.

Objectives

1. To understand the role of Print Media during the significant events organised by SAARC.
2. To compare the Print Media in the respective SAARC countries so as to identify the similarities and dissimilarities.

KEYWORDS : SAARC, Print Media and Regional Cooperation, 18th SAARC Summit, Print Media and Political Communication, Print Media and Regional Blocs' Awareness, Print Media in South Asia, Print Media Research and News Production Theory, Mass Communication and Media Studies.

Introduction

The global socio-political and geographical environment has been very dynamic and volatile. The world has witnessed two gruesome world wars, the later period was followed by the cold war that led to the emergence of a bipolar world where the free market economies and communist economies were separated by the iron curtain. The global scenario changed radically with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2014)¹ and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Croaker, 2014)² and the cold war came to an end. Now the world was once again unipolar where free trade economies ruled the roost. As a result several communist countries changed their mind set and embraced free market economies. After this paradigm shift the term globalisation evolved in order to facilitate free trade among the countries of the world. During this time another very interesting trend i.e. formation of regional blocs was also noticed. A regional block may be defined as a group of countries located in the similar geographical region of the world that come together to form regional entities in order to leverage their voice at the global platform comprising UN, WTO, World Bank and other free trade agreements. Simultaneously the media scenario also evolved as a result of the technological advancements in the field and we witnessed the evolution of the global media. This global media has managed to establish communication linkages that have shrunk the world into a global village.

In the Indian context, the regional block is referred to as the Indian Subcontinent and recently this term has been replaced with the term South Asia. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives constitute the South Asian countries that cover about 4.4 million km² which is 10 per cent of the Asian continent and 3.3 per cent of the world's land surface area. Defining the constituent countries of South Asia has more of political implications rather than geographical. The political histories of the countries in this region can be traced to vedic period (1500 BC), long before the British consolidated them into a colony named British India (Maps of India, 2014)³.

SAARC: an overview

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) comprises eight member states i.e. Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri-Lanka and Afghanistan joined SAARC in 2007. SAARC was established when its Charter was formally adopted on December 8, 1985 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. This association is a manifestation of the determination of the people of South Asia to work together in a spirit of friendship, trust and understanding and to create an order based on mutual respect, equity and shared benefits. There are nine countries namely; Australia, the People's Republic of China, the Islamic State of Iran, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Mauritius, the Un-

ion of Myanmar, the United States of America and the European Union that have been given the status of SAARC Observers (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation [SAARC], 2009)⁴.

SAARC Philosophy

SAARC philosophy has been cited through the objectives enlisted in **Article I** of SAARC Charter (SAARC, 2009)⁵ as follows:

- To promote the welfare of the people of SOUTH ASIA and to improve their quality of life;
- To accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and to provide all individuals the opportunity to live in dignity and to realise their full potentials;
- To promote and strengthen collective self-reliance among the countries of SOUTH ASIA;
- To contribute mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of one another's problems;
- To promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical and scientific fields;
- To strengthen cooperation with other developing countries;
- To strengthen cooperation among themselves in international forums on matters of common interest; and
- To cooperate with international and regional organisations with similar aims and purposes.

Regional peace and harmony is essential for prosperity in the region. Developing country like India can put tabs on its ever escalating defence budget if political enmity and disputes are resolved. India comes into its own on the world stage when it carries the neighbourhood with it. Print Media can generate public opinion and create an atmosphere for constructive and progressive role so as to realise SAARC philosophy of regional collaboration to promote the welfare and hence improving the quality of life of the people in the region.

News Production theory

This theory emphasises upon the importance of media in influencing what people think about a given issue, as a result of, how issues are covered and why? The manner in which the print media presents the news can affect how the public understands and perceives SAARC. The framing of issues is determined by several elements, particularly organisational constraints, journalists' professional judgements and evaluations of their readers. The theory also confirms, the less direct experience or contact the public has with a given issue, the more it must depend on the news media for information. Since most issues dealing with SAARC are relatively removed from people's daily lives, the media functions as the main agents through which people can find information or explanation.

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Research Methodology

The present study *Media Representation of the 18th SAARC Summit: Comparing Newspaper Coverage in Member Nations* is based on the qualitative content analysis method and in-depth interviews of journalists who cover SAARC. The sample for the study includes one English daily (newspaper) from all the SAARC member nations, each. The selected sample of 8 newspapers was examined for duration of one week (November 24 – 30, 2014), as this period coincided with the 18th SAARC Summit. The researcher has relied on the web version of the newspapers from neighbouring countries in order to gather insight into the objectives listed above. In-depth interviews of journalists were also conducted.

Results and Discussion

The news reports fail to explain the process of regional integration. It was observed that the news reports did not make sufficient efforts to explain the concept of regional integration, in particular. There was a general lack of concern and the initiative to focus on topics like; What SAARC means to people of South Asia? How does regional integration work? The news reports did not emphasise on generating public opinion about SAARC.

Preference is given to attractive headlines. It was observed that there was a tendency to give attractive headlines. Unfortunately, the news report could not match up to the headline.

SAARC fails to fly, again (The Daily Star, Bangladesh).
Trying, sincerely (The Daily Star, Bangladesh).
Chinese whispers get louder in SAARC (Asian Age, ND).
Leaders clinch last minute agreement to set up a regional electricity grid (Dawn, Pakistan).

Obsession with Indo-Pak conflict. The newspapers from India and Pakistan are obsessed with the coverage of Indo-Pak conflict and standoff. Their coverage of the summit is primarily focused on the leaders and bi-lateral issues between India and Pakistan. The significance of the summit has been overshadowed by the ups and downs of their relationships.

Pak: A roadblock to consensus (Asian Age, ND).
India should take initiatives to resume talks: PM (Dawn, Pakistan).
Hopes fade for a Sharif-Modi meeting at SAARC summit (Dawn, Pakistan).
Sharif-Modi handshake rescues SAARC summit (Dawn, Pakistan).

Bad news has more takers. The journalists were of the view that it was their responsibility to highlight the negative aspects. They as-

sumed that their reader also expected the same.

Leaders fail to agree on transport, energy accords (Dawn, Pakistan).
SAARC meet- is it a ritual? (Sri Lankan Guardian).
3 treaties bite the dust (The Daily Star, Bangladesh).

There is an urge to reach the widest possible readership.

Very few news reports depict the role of SAARC as a forum for inclusive development in the South Asian region. The Daily Star (Bangladesh) has provided detailed and dedicated coverage. It has taken the initiative to also include the speech delivered by other leaders but their coverage is very brief and lacks any interpretation or analysis.

SAARC leaders call for deeper co-operation in space technology (Outlook, Afghanistan).
Energy agreement is highlight of 18th SAARC summit (Bhutan Observer).

Bureaucrats and Politicians control the agenda. Majority of the national newspapers have largely focused on the participation and contribution of their own national leaders. The Daily Star (Bangladesh) has focused its coverage about the activities and meetings of Bangladeshi PM Sheikh Hasina in Kathmandu during the summit. The news reports were outnumbered by the photographs.

Modi assures Hasina of land boundary, Testa deals in bi-lateral talks (The Daily Star, Bangladesh).
Actively engage to build connectivity: Hasina urges other SAARC leaders (The Daily Star, Bangladesh).
Hasina, Nawaz discuss power, terrorism (The Daily Star, Bangladesh).

Conclusion

Results reveal that there are major differences among the newspapers analysed here in terms of how they represented SAARC in the news, according to their nationality and political orientation. Furthermore, many of the principles that dominate the production of news undermine information on SAARC. The material on SAARC tends to refine traditional views on economics, politics and society, including the widespread belief that a national government is better than SAARC for solving society's problems.

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