



## Human Interest Stories and Absence of Women Journalists During Days of Terrorism in Punjab, India - A Critical Analysis

**Manish Sirhindi**

Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, Department of Botany, Punjabi University, Patiala

**N. S. Johal**

Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, Department of Botany, Punjabi University, Patiala

### ABSTRACT

The commoners in Punjab were losing their close ones to the idea of 'Khalistan' that had prompted reckless bloodshed across the state and also at the hands of the security agencies, which were trying to throttle the Khalistan movement aimed at having a separate state. This research paper analyzes as to how the non-presence of women journalists in the field affected the overall coverage of the human interest stories pertaining to silent suffering of humans, especially of the women. The researcher has adopted Content Analysis as a quantitative research methodology for which data was collected from two newspapers 'The Tribune' and 'The Indian Express' that were published from within Punjab. The papers were studied for over two months from May 1, 1994 till June 30, 1984, during which Operational Blue Star had also taken place at Shri Harminder Sahib.

### KEYWORDS

Punjab, terrorism, print media, women journalists, reporting, killings, political, harassed, suffering.

### Introduction and background

At a time when one of the most prosperous states of the country-Punjab-was being pushed into the 'dark days of terrorism' by not one, but a number of factors including political, economic and communal, all efforts of moderation to curtail the rising aggression that was claiming many lives, had failed to take shape.

While a number of authors and historians penned memoirs of those days, with many digging out the truth that prevailed then, the suffering of the people caused by the reckless killings at the hands of the armed youth, especially of caused to the women, who lost their sons, husbands and even fathers to the 'insanity' that gripped a large section of the Punjabi society, almost went 'under-reported' during those days.

### Absence of women journalists during days of Terrorism

The newspapers in those days were busy highlighting acts of terrorism and were sensationalizing reports to increase their circulations. The kind of ordeal that the humans in those days were facing could have been understood and narrated in a better way by women journalists, who are known to be more empathetic.

However, these stories of human torment got lost in the history as journalists back then were not writing much on the plight being suffered by the commoners. Also there weren't many women journalists to write on female sufferings. While, some correspondents made a sincere attempt to describe predicaments experienced by those who suffered losses, they could not cover all aspects associated with it.

It can be rightly said that if the suffering of the women could have been highlighted in the media, it could have played a crucial role to reshaping the psyche of the Punjabi youth, who had taken up the arms. The suffering of their mothers and sisters, if brought to light by the mainstream media, could have inspired 'questions' against the need to have a separate state which was to be called 'khalistan' at the cost of human lives.

### Women were suffering at the hands of security forces too

The suffering was caused not only by the killings that were taking places at the hands of armed youth who had taken up guns to materialize the idea of 'Khalistan', but if the collection

of the incidents listed by Balpreet Singh in one of his articles available an website supporting freedom for Sikhs is to be believed, the women were also becoming victims of 'crime' being committed by the security forces.

In his article Balpreet Singh begins with a narration of an incident in which Brig. RP Sinha addressing assembled Sikh villagers on March 8, 1991, International Women's Day (village name not quoted) says "If any action occurs in this village, every single male is going to be taken out and shot. Then we're going to take all the women to our camp and there we're going to create a new breed for Punjab." [1]

The author says the untold story of the Sikh Resistance Movement is the story of Sikh women. It is a feature of Punjabi culture that atrocities on women were rarely reported and remain hidden. Families felt ashamed to speak of the treatment women received at the hands of Indian Security Forces, but this story must be told.[1]

He said that many Sikh women participated in the Sikh resistance movement as fighters working as messengers for Sikh resistance groups as well as preparing hideouts and serving tired Sikh fighters. But unfortunately, many Sikh women were also the target of the bloody thirsty Indian Security forces. He says that the Sikh women were ruthlessly tortured, not only physically but also mentally. They were used as tools to force the surrender of Sikh fighters who were their relatives and also as a means of humiliating families. When Sikh women were arrested with their husbands, the husbands were often forced to watch the rape of their wives. Rape was used as an interrogation tool.

The Indian Forces also began a program of "shudhee karan", which was a code name for the rape of Sikh women. They joked that the offspring of their rapes would change the genetic makeup of the Sikh community and they would kill the Resistance in this way. Many rape victims took their own lives, unable to live with the ongoing humiliation at the hands of the Indian police. [1]

In his article Balpreet has also quoted examples of a number of women who had been put to torment by the security agencies. After detailing the incidents of torments, Balpreet Singh

concludes his article and these incidents and a number of other went unreported during the days of terrorism. [1]

In one of the articles available online, titled 'The Tragedy of 1984: Challenges for a Sikh Journalist' the writers Darshan S. Tatla and Jaspal S. Sidhu state "All men and women who were captured during the army action from the Golden Temple were being held in this enclosure as POWs. Their numbers were increasing with more army raids now taking place around the city." [2]

However, a detailed research on as to what the women suffered while they were being detained by the army could not establish that their plight was reported by the media in those days. It could be attributed to the fact that the immediate reporting on their suffering was not possible due to the 'ban' on publications that prevailed during the days of Operation Blue Star. But, no attempts were ever made even after the operation was over and the publication house had resumed printing the newspapers to reach out to these women who had being subjected to human rights violations during the army operation.

A team appointed by the Punjab Women's Forum also documented evidence of police terrorism directed against women in some villages of districts of Ludhiana and Batala. [4]

The report titled 'The Rape of Punjab-Indian State's Indignities on Sikh Women and Children I - Humiliated, Tortured and Raped' which has collected a number of instances in which the women and children had face the wrath of the security forces, says:

'There had been cases provide glaring evidence of the continuing terrorism all over Punjab. 'Our pen cannot adequately convey to you the pain of these women. Their suffering cannot be easily felt or shared. These cases are living testimony to the suffering of the Sikh women. Background Since 1984 when Punjab came under the heel of Punjab police and many armed gangs, untold numbers of innocents have languished in jails, countless number of young persons has been killed by police in fake encounters and many others continue to be brutalized in new detention centres.

The reports states because of their political and religious views, some women too were caught in this web of violence but they were few. Instances include the repeated arrest of Bimal Kaur Khalsa (widow of Bhai Beant Singh); the arrest of the women singers (chorale) from Nabha, the arrest and continued detention in Jodhpur of many women arrested at the Golden Temple, Amritsar in June 1984 in the aftermath of Operation Blue Star; raids at the houses of the young people, the abusive interrogation of women; the arrest of the parents of the Panthic Committee member Wassan Singh Zaffarwal; the killing of a pregnant woman by the Border Security Police in district Gurdaspur.

One heart rendering incident occurred as follows: In searching for young men, 50 to 60 police surrounded a barn and without warning started firing. It was just past 7:0 p.m., when bullets started smashing windows. The women inside were petrified. Taking shock of the situation, some older women hid the children in closets. In spite of widespread firing all around her, the oldest woman in the house decided to come out of the house. She said, "I have lived my life and not now see children massacred in front of my eyes!" She came out and from behind a pillar shouted: "Stop firing- you can come in and search the house. There is nothing to hide." The police officers, drunk in liquor, however kept on firing. After 10 to 15 minutes, an officer gave the command to cease firing. During the search, no male was found. The persons in the family were in the city that day; 13 women and children were found. The police were abusive. In the winter's cold, children and women including the mother of a two-week old baby were forced of the house. Not even blankets were allowed to them. For the first time in December 1986, the armed units

molested and raped women in village Brahampura, near Tarn Taran, in district Amritsar. When Avtar Singh Brahampura escaped the cordon of police, the police retaliated by venting their anger on innocent people, by beating them up and by raping and molesting five women. One of those young women spent the night without clothes, hiding behind some bushes. This angered the people so much that the government had to transfer the responsible battalion of Central Reserve Police Force out of that area but the people's demand of justice and trial of those responsible was never accepted. From mid-1987, atrocities on women by the police and armed gangs have crossed all limits of civilized behaviour. Incidents of violence are not part of any particular search operation for wanted people, raids or interrogation but occur because the Central government has granted unlimited powers to armed units so that they can suppress the voice of revolution in Punjab. The police and the security have started these atrocities on women for they have been unable to bring to submission the young people of Punjab by resorting to unlawful arrests, torture in special prisons and even killings in so-called encounters.'

### Significance of the research

Many of the social scientists have opinionated that media industry has become a powerful tool of opinion building or shaping opinion of the public pertaining to any specific social or political issue. This opinion of the public is mostly measured through public survey and other techniques of the research assist to measure the opinion of the citizens about any issue. This research project is also an effort to analyse the mind-set and policy of the leading newspapers that were being published in Punjab in regard with the suffering of the women. If the newspaper had made efforts to engage women journalists to do stories on the human sufferings, the impact of the same would have been a different on the society.

This research may also be helpful to understand the policy of the newspapers in highlighting or undermining the role women journalists during situations like terrorism. Based on facts, the researcher has tried his best to analyse objectively the coverage given to the human suffering during days of terrorism. The research project is helpful and develops understanding about purpose; functioning and responsibilities of the newspaper organisations during critical situations like terrorism upon which the newspapers highlighted their role and ultimate public perception and reaction to the plight of the humans in Punjab who were suffering during the dark days of terrorism.

### General perception regarding women in journalism

It has long been established that journalism has always been a domain of the male and the situation is more or less the same within the country and even in foreign land. As per a report by Monika Djerf-Pierre's, 'The Gender of Journalism' - even in Sweden — which has the narrowest gender disparity as per the World Economic Forum — journalism has been a male dominated one. Citing figures related under the BBC's Freedom of Information Act, she says, "female journalists working on the BBC's flagship television news bulletins earn Euro 6500 less than their male counterparts on average. The disclosure supports of claims of the existence of a glass ceiling for women journalists at the BBC." [3]

In the last decade, more women have entered the profession, and many have equal access to all beats, blurring the 'traditional male area' line considerably. But during the days of terrorism there were only one or two women in the entire state who were working in the field.

Jaspal Singh Sidhu, who retired as a Special Correspondent with United News of India (UNI) at its New Delhi Headquarters in 2008 and had remained posted at Amritsar during the peak of terrorism, said that during those days there were a limited number of woman reporters who were active in the field. Recalling his association with Tavleen Singh, who used to travel down from New Delhi to Amritsar and report on the developments, he said that while Tavleen had a grip on the major political developments, but she could not reach out to

the common women of the state, who were the silent sufferers of the blood shed that was taking place across the state.

He said that there was Saroj Sirhindi, the only woman journalist hailing from Punjab, who was doing active journalism and was reporting on the political developments that were taking place in that part of the state. While, she did her bit in bringing to fore the women, who were becoming victims of the terrorism, but more women were needed to change the mindset of the Punjabi youth who had been misguided by the perpetrators of the Khalistan.

A majority of studies showed that women are generally considered less capable of relaying news and events than their male colleagues, which could be seen as backward considering that today more females consume news than males. Personal views are continually shaped through consumption of mass media, which could lead one to assume that society will reinforce a "lower public status for women relative to men" (Armstrong, 2004, p. 140) as fewer women journalists or sources are shown in news coverage. Women have been fairly successful in breaking into the news business. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, only 13 per cent of reporters were women, whereas today about half of reporters are women.

One study found that although female reporters presenting news stories were perceived as being more credible than male reporters presenting similar stories, male reporters were seen as being more credible persons overall. However, the gender of the news viewer also has to be considered; generally, recipients find reporters of his or her same gender to be credible. Another noticeable finding from this study was that although young reporters' credibility was not influenced by age, the older, male reporters were considered to be the most credible reporters (Weibel, Wissmath, & Groner, 2008).

**How the women reporters could have covered these events better**

The above-mentioned facts were the only some of the instances where a correspondent reached out to the women who had become victims of the police atrocities. But the efforts seemed to have been inadequate in creating a general feeling against the acts of terrorism, which had prompted such atrocities in the name of ending terrorism in the state.

Female reporters were more likely to report on human interest and health stories, while males reported on politics. With-in those stories, males were more often cited as experts and sourced more frequently than female experts, while there were no major differences between male and female non-experts. [5]

**Objectives**

1. To analyze the number of the human interest stories published in The Tribune and The Indian Express in comparison to political and spot reports.
2. To examine the highlighting of the human suffering by the print media during days of terrorism.
3. To analyze the overall coverage by the two newspaper.
4. To establish a link between number of human interest stories and women reporters during days of terrorism.

**Hypothesis**

The coverage of human interest stories especially that related to the suffering and torture of the women at the hands of the security agencies remained low during the days of terrorism. This was primarily because not many woman reporters were working in the field during those days.

**Methodology**

The researchers adopted Content Analysis as a research methodology for this project. For the data collection and data analysis, the researchers used descriptive statistics to find out the quantity of the news coverage about the plight of the women during the days of terrorism in the above-mentioned two newspapers.

**Data Analysis**

Sr. No.	Category	The Tribune	Percentage	The Indian Express	Percentage
1.	Political	270	40.14 %	108	53.67%
2.	Spots	174	53.15%	143	34.52%
3.	Human interest	64	6.69%	18	12.69%
4.	Total	504		269	

**Table 1**

The Table 1 shows that overall 504 news items were published in The Tribune as compared to total of 269 news items in The Indian Express that were studied during this research. The comparative content analysis shows that The Tribune carried total 270 political news items as compared to 108 news items published in The Indian Express, with total percentage of 40.14 and 53.67, respectively. Likewise, total spots news items that were published in The Tribune were 174, whereas spot news item was published in The Indian Express were 143, with a percentage of 53.15 and 34.52, respectively.

However, the human interest stories that were published in The Tribune were 64 while in The Indian express it was 18, with a percentage of 6.69 and 12.69, respectively.

**Findings and Discussion**

After collecting the data and analyzing all the data including news that related to politics and the spot happening and the human interest stories about the incidents that were taking place in Punjab that were published in leading newspaper, the researcher have collected several findings given in following fashion:

The Tribune gave more coverage to political news reports as compared to The Indian Express.

The Tribune gave more coverage to spot news reports as compared to The Indian Express.

The Tribune gave more coverage to Human Interest stories as compared to The Indian Express.

Overall, both the newspapers gave adequate space to the political and spot reports while the human interest stories were somehow not given as much space by the newspapers. The tendency of highlighting the political developments remained high as compared to the human interest stories.

**Conclusion**

The research study showed that both leading newspapers The Tribune and The Indian Express carried reports on the political and other developments that were taking place in the state during the period of the two months for which the news papers were studied.

The results further showed that The Tribune had more number of stories for political, spot and human interest as compared The Indian Express.

The results analysed gave findings that human interest stories remained low on priority of the news papers even as The Tribune published more number of the human interest stories as compared to The Indian Express. The overall tendency of both leading newspapers remained low for human interest stories.

In short, the news coverage of the newspapers has shown that absence of women journalists had affected the coverage of women suffering. Similarly, the findings of the study also strengthened the thesis that assumed as 'The Tribune' gave more coverage to the human suffering as compared to 'The

Indian express', which maintained a stand against the killings and terrorism that had spread across the state through out the two months that were covered.

The results have endorsed that reporting of human interest stories/stories of human suffering had remained low on the priority of the newspapers and more space was given to the political developments and acts of terrorism.

It also appears that the ordeal suffered by the non-combatant populace at the hands of the security agencies had also not been on the priority list of the newspapers back then. It can aptly be said that correspondents back then could not do justice to the plight being suffered by commoners, especially those who had lost their close ones to the bullets fired either by the terrorists or by the security agencies.

The findings of this research project further endorsed that women journalists, with their knack for human interest stories can always play an important role in highlighting the social issues that affect the lives of thousands of people. If the newspaper had engaged more women journalists, it can be presumed that the number of human interest stories would have been more in two papers.

### **Acknowledgments**

The author would like to extend her thanks to Dr. N S Johal at the department of Journalism and Mass communication at Punjabi University for his guidance, inspiration, and advice, without which the article could not be published.

### **References**

1. <http://www.sikhfreedom.com/atrocities-on-sikh-women-in-punjab>
2. <http://sikhsiyasat.net/2015/03/16/the-tragedy-of-1984-challenges-for-a-sikh-journalist/>
3. [ftp://66.116.170.27/WendyPhd/FINAL%20THESIS%20CHAPTERSthis%20one/Essy,%20The%20Gender%20of%20Journalism,%202007\[1\].pdf](ftp://66.116.170.27/WendyPhd/FINAL%20THESIS%20CHAPTERSthis%20one/Essy,%20The%20Gender%20of%20Journalism,%202007[1].pdf)
4. <file:///C:/Documents%20and%20Settings/MS%20Latest/Desktop/The%20Rape%20of%20Punjab.pdf>
5. <http://www.elon.edu/docs/e-web/academics/communications/research/vol-4no1/04irvinejspring13.pdf>