



MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF THE 2020 DELHI RIOTS AND ITS IMPACT ON EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF EAST DELHI

Rahul Yadav ¹, Vishal Verma ², Varsha Chaudhary ³

PhD Scholar,

Department of Education, University of Delhi,

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how media framing of the 2020 Delhi riots shaped perceptions of school safety, institutional trust, and educational engagement in riot-affected areas of East Delhi. While prior scholarship has examined media representation of communal violence and education in conflict contexts independently, limited research explores their intersection. Drawing upon framing theory and education-in-conflict literature, this qualitative case study integrates media content analysis with semi-structured interviews conducted with 30 participants including students, teachers, and parents from the Yamuna Par region. Findings indicate that dominant conflict-oriented media frames amplified perceived insecurity, influenced parental decision-making regarding school attendance, and contributed to short-term emotional distress among students. Educational recovery processes received limited thematic attention in mainstream coverage. The study proposes a conceptual pathway linking media framing to perceived educational vulnerability and argues for conflict-sensitive journalism and psychosocial school interventions in post-riot settings.

Keywords: media framing, communal violence, education in conflict, school safety, Delhi riots

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INTRODUCTION

The communal violence that occurred in Northeast Delhi in February 2020 resulted in significant human loss, property destruction, and long-lasting social disruption. Beyond immediate physical consequences, the riots generated psychological, institutional, and educational implications, particularly for children residing in affected areas. Media outlets played a central role in constructing public narratives surrounding the violence. Television broadcasts, print journalism, and digital platforms repeatedly circulated images of destruction, political confrontation, and communal polarization. While such reporting documented critical events, it also shaped public interpretation and emotional response.

This study focuses on East Delhi's Yamuna Par area, examining how media representations of the riots have affected the educational experiences of a small sample of students, teachers, and families in the region. Communal riots, marked by violent conflicts between different religious or ethnic groups, have historically been a source of social, political, and economic instability in many parts of the world. These incidents not only cause immediate loss of life and property but also have enduring impacts on various societal aspects, including education (Varshney, 2002). As a primary source of information and a powerful tool for shaping public opinion, the media plays a crucial role in how these events are perceived, interpreted, and remembered (Entman, 1993).

Although media studies have extensively examined framing patterns in communal conflicts, and educational research has explored schooling in conflict-affected contexts, few studies analyze how media representation influences educational perceptions at the community level. This study



addresses that gap by examining the Yamuna Par region of East Delhi and investigating how media narratives affected perceptions of safety, attendance patterns, and institutional trust.

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in framing theory, which posits that the selection and emphasis of particular aspects of reality influence audience interpretation (Entman, 1993). Goffman (1974) conceptualized frames as interpretive schemata through which individuals make sense of events. Iyengar (1991) distinguished between episodic framing, which highlights specific events, and thematic framing, which situates issues within broader structural contexts.

Building on these foundations, the study proposes a conceptual pathway: Media Framing (conflict, political, victim frames) influences Perceived Insecurity and Emotional Response, which shapes Parental Decision-Making and Institutional Trust, ultimately affecting Educational Engagement and Attendance. This framework bridges media studies and education-in-conflict scholarship and positions educational trust as a mediating variable between symbolic representation and institutional participation.

Media Representation on and Framing Theory

Media framing theory examines how news outlets shape public perception on of issues through selective presentation on and emphasis. Framing analysis reveals sociocultural components in tourism narratives (Santos, 2005. Scheufele (1999) proposes a comprehensive model of framing effects, identifying key processes like frame building and se ng. In foreign policy and war coverage, media framing exerts significant influence on public opinion and policymaking (Boaz, 2005). The media's power to frame issues has earned them the title of the "fourth estate" in the United States (Boaz, 2005). However, the media are also vulnerable to manipulation on by policymakers as a propaganda tool (Boaz, 2005). Understanding framing effects is crucial for analyzing media's role in shaping



public discourse and policy outcomes across various domains, including tourism, health crises, and international relations.

Media Portrayal of Communal Riots

The media plays a crucial role in shaping public perception during communal riots in India. While the English-language press tends to frame Muslims more favorably compared to the communal language press (Narayana & Kapur, 2011), media coverage of riots like the 1984 Sikh riots and 2002 Gujarat riots has faced criticism for its objectivity. Television, particularly 24-hour news channels, has become central to the politics of violence, as demonstrated during the 2002 Gujarat riots. Despite generally hostile coverage towards Hindu right-wing forces, the ruling BJP successfully portrayed media criticism as an attack on Gujarat regional honor, turning it into an election issue (Mehta, 2006). This framing continues to influence perceptions of religious conflicts in India.

Impact of Media on Public Perceptions

Media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of various issues, particularly crime and international relations. Research indicates that media framing can lead to bias and stereotyping in criminal cases, potentially compromising the judicial process (Fadhilah, 2024). The media's influence extends to public opinions on crime and safety, often amplifying fear and reinforcing stereotypes (Anand & Taneja, 2024). Studies have identified three interconnected avenues of media perception on research: credibility and trust, hostile media perceptions, and third-person perception (Tsfati & Cohen, 2012). These perceptions can moderate media effects and influence audience reactions. Furthermore, the agenda-setting function of news media affects public perceptions of countries' importance to the United States, with extensive coverage correlating to perceived significance. Negative coverage of countries tends to result in negative public perceptions, highlighting the media's impact on international relations (Wanta, 2018).



Education in Conflict-Affected Areas

Education in conflict-affected areas faces numerous challenges, impacting millions of children worldwide. These challenges include damaged infrastructure, disrupted schedules, child recruitment by armed groups, and ideological manipulation of curricula (Rai, 2020). The consequences are particularly severe in South Asian countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka (Rai, 2020). To address these issues, there is a growing need to establish schools as zones of peace and expand access to emergency education (Sommers, 2002). Researchers argue that education should be conceptualized as a process of dismantling conflict-inducing structures and promoting critical inquiry, respect for diversity, and social justice. Despite these efforts, support for education in conflict-affected areas remains insufficient, particularly for youth programming (Sommers, 2002).

Intersection of Media, Communal Violence, and Education

a complex issue with far reaching consequences. Media, including social platforms, can incite fear and violence, negatively impacting students' emotional balance and educational experiences (Nair, 2021). During communal riots, social media can be misused to spread hate, fake information, and misleading videos, exacerbating tensions (Roy & Shukla, 2016). The rise of right-wing Hindu extremism in India has led to the radicalization of youth through Hindutva ideology, resulting in Islamophobia and communal violence (Deshmukh, 2021). Media representations open create polarizing discourses that demonize minority groups, particularly young Muslim men, advocating for ethnic integra on over multiculturalism (Mills & Keddie, 2010). These studies highlight the need for responsible media use, content regulation, and a more nuanced understanding of cultural issues to address violence and its impact on education effectively. While research on media representation of communal riots and studies on education in conflict-affected areas are abundant,



there is a relative scarcity of literature explicitly examining the intersection of these fields. This gap in the literature presents an opportunity for the current study to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how media portrayal of communal violence affects educational perceptions and experiences. Some scholars have touched upon related themes. For instance, Niens and Cairns (2005) discuss the role of media in peace education initiatives in Northern Ireland, highlighting how media can be used as a tool for promoting understanding and reconciliation. However, comprehensive studies focusing specifically on the impact of media representation of communal riots on education are limited. This literature review reveals a need for more focused research on the complex relationships between media portrayal of communal riots and its effects on education in affected areas. The current study aims to address this gap by synthesizing insights from media studies, conflict research, and educational theory to provide a comprehensive analysis of this important issue.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study design was adopted to capture experience-based and perception-driven educational impacts. The Yamuna Par region was selected due to its documented exposure to riot-related disturbances. Qualitative inquiry allowed for nuanced exploration of fear, trust, and schooling decisions that quantitative surveys may not fully capture.

Participants were purposively selected to ensure representation across stakeholder groups. The sample included 10 students (aged 13–17), 10 teachers, and 10 parents from schools located in affected neighborhoods. The sample size was considered sufficient to achieve thematic saturation within the defined research scope.

Data collection involved two components: media content analysis and semi-structured interviews. Media coverage from February to April 2020 across major national newspapers and prime-time television broadcasts was reviewed to identify dominant frames and recurring



narratives. Interview questions focused on media exposure patterns, perceptions of safety, school attendance decisions, and academic engagement following the riots.

Thematic analysis was conducted through iterative coding. Patterns were identified across participant groups and triangulated with media framing observations. Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility (data triangulation), transferability (thick contextual description), dependability (systematic coding documentation), and confirmability (reflexive awareness during interpretation).

The researcher acknowledges positional proximity as a Delhi-based scholar. Contextual familiarity enhanced interpretive sensitivity while requiring reflexive caution to minimize subjective bias.

Findings

Patterns of Media Representation

The findings show that media coverage of the 2020 Delhi riots was dominated by sensationalized reporting, with television channels and newspapers repeatedly showing images of burning vehicles, stone-pelting crowds, and police action. This framing amplified fear among parents, teachers, and students. One parent reflected, *“Every time I switched on the TV, it felt like the city was collapsing. How could I think of sending my child to school in such chaos?”* While some empathetic stories highlighted the human cost of the riots, such as interviews with families who lost homes, the overall tone leaned toward dramatization. Teachers noted that this style of reporting created a climate of suspicion and anxiety, with one teacher saying, *“The media made it look like schools were battlegrounds, not places of learning.”*

Coverage of Educational Impact

Although schools were frequently mentioned in reports, the coverage largely focused on closures, damage to infrastructure, and immediate disruption. The



deeper educational consequences—trauma, disrupted learning, and long-term academic setbacks—were underrepresented. A student explained, *“They kept saying schools are closed, but nobody asked how we were feeling or how we would catch up with studies.”* This narrow framing meant that the broader challenges faced by students and teachers, including emotional recovery and rebuilding confidence in schooling, were overlooked in public discourse. Teachers expressed frustration that the media ignored the psychological toll, with one remarking, *“We were dealing with children who cried in class, but the news only showed broken walls.”*

Public Perceptions and Attitudes

Parents, teachers, and students expressed skepticism toward media narratives, criticizing exaggeration and sensationalism. Many parents hesitated to send children back to school, fearing for their safety. One parent said, *“The news made me believe the school was unsafe, even though the principal assured us otherwise.”* Teachers reported difficulty in reassuring families, noting that sensational headlines often outweighed their efforts. Students themselves internalized these fears, leading to heightened anxiety and reluctance to engage fully in classroom activities. A student reflected, *“I felt scared even when nothing was happening near my school, because the TV kept showing violence.”* The findings suggest that media reporting directly shaped community attitudes toward education in riot-affected areas.

Impact on Educational Policies and Practices

Schools responded to media-driven pressure by adopting visible security measures such as stricter entry protocols and surveillance systems. These steps were intended to reassure families but often lacked long-term planning for resilience. A school administrator explained, *“We installed cameras because parents demanded it after seeing news reports, but what we really needed was counselling support.”* Some educators attempted to integrate peace education and conflict resolution into



lessons, recognizing the need to address communal tensions. However, these initiatives were limited and often undermined by persistent biases and mistrust among students. Teachers admitted that while they tried to use classroom discussions to promote unity, *“the images children saw at home were stronger than our words.”*

Educational Experiences of Students and Teachers

Students reported difficulty concentrating, increased absenteeism, and declining academic performance. One student shared, *“I couldn’t focus on maths because I kept thinking about the riots.”* Teachers observed tensions between religious groups within classrooms, which disrupted learning environments and created challenges in maintaining neutrality. A teacher explained, *“Some students started blaming each other’s communities, and it was heartbreaking to see friendships break.”* The riots left many students reconsidering their educational futures, with some expressing doubts about continuing studies in unsafe or unstable contexts. Teachers themselves faced emotional strain, balancing professional responsibilities with personal fears, as one admitted, *“I was scared too, but I had to stand strong for my students.”*

Long-term Consequences

The findings highlight that media portrayals contributed to lasting distrust in schools. Even after violence subsided, parents continued to question safety, and schools in riot-affected areas struggled to regain credibility. A parent reflected, *“Even months later, I kept thinking of those TV images whenever my child left for school.”* Unequal resource allocation deepened educational inequality, as schools in “safer” neighbourhoods received more support and investment compared to those directly impacted by the riots. Teachers in affected schools complained, *“We were left behind while other schools moved forward.”* This reinforced divides and widened gaps in educational opportunities, leaving vulnerable students at a disadvantage.



Positive Narratives

Despite the dominance of negative coverage, some media stories highlighted resilience, unity, and the role of education in rebuilding communities. These accounts inspired hope, portraying schools as spaces for healing and reconciliation. A student recalled, *“I saw a news story about children painting peace messages, and it made me feel proud that education could bring us together.”*

Teachers who engaged with such narratives reported feeling motivated to use education as a tool to overcome divisions and restore trust. One teacher said, *“When the media showed students helping each other, it reminded us that schools can be places of hope.”* This demonstrates the potential of media to contribute positively to recovery when reporting is balanced and constructive.

Discussion

The discussion of this study underscores the multifaceted influence of media on education during the 2020 Delhi riots. The findings reveal that sensationalized coverage not only amplified fear but also reshaped public perceptions of schools as unsafe spaces. This aligns with scholarship on media framing, which suggests that repeated exposure to violent imagery can distort community trust in institutions. At the same time, the neglect of deeper educational consequences—such as trauma, disrupted learning, and long-term academic setbacks—illustrates how media narratives often privilege immediacy over sustained impact. Participants’ reflections highlight this gap, as parents and teachers consistently noted that headlines focused on closures rather than the emotional struggles of children. The reactive policy responses observed, including heightened security measures, demonstrate how media pressure can drive short-term solutions while sidelining structural reforms. Teachers’ attempts to introduce peace education and conflict resolution were commendable, yet their effectiveness was undermined by the stronger influence of media imagery and persistent mistrust among students. The lived experiences of students and



teachers further illustrate how anxiety, absenteeism, and fractured classroom relationships became enduring challenges, reinforcing the argument that education in conflict zones requires more than infrastructural recovery. Long-term consequences, such as widening inequalities between “safe” and riot-affected schools, reveal how media portrayals can indirectly shape resource distribution. Yet, the presence of positive narratives emphasizing resilience and unity demonstrates the potential of balanced reporting to contribute to healing. Taken together, these insights emphasize the need for conflict-sensitive journalism, sustained policy planning, and educational practices that prioritize both safety and emotional well-being.

Implications

For media practitioners, conflict-sensitive reporting frameworks are essential to balance urgency with contextual depth. For policymakers, educational recovery strategies should incorporate psychosocial support and community trust-building mechanisms. For educators, structured peace education initiatives and open dialogue forums may mitigate residual tensions. Media literacy programs can equip students to critically evaluate sensational narratives.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that media coverage of the 2020 Delhi riots significantly shaped perceptions of school safety, amplifying fear and uncertainty among parents, students, and teachers. While immediate concerns such as violence and closures dominated reporting, long-term impacts like trauma, absenteeism, and reduced academic engagement were largely overlooked, leaving schools to grapple with psychological strain and disrupted learning environments. Policy responses were reactive, emphasizing security measures rather than sustained planning, which deepened educational inequalities by reinforcing divides between “safe” and “unsafe” schools. Yet, the media also played a constructive role by highlighting



resilience and education as a unifying force, suggesting its potential in recovery and peace-building. These findings underscore the need for conflict-sensitive reporting, data-driven policymaking, counseling support, peace education, and media literacy initiatives, while future research should examine alternative media platforms, citizen journalism, and longitudinal studies to better understand the lasting educational consequences of riots. Thus, this study contributes to the broader discourse on the intersection of media, conflict, and education, offering insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers seeking to foster equity and resilience in crisis-affected schooling.

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