Declining Sex Ratio In India And Mass Media

An Analysis From The Perspective of Agenda Setting Theory of Mass Media

Dr. Pawan Kumar Tiwari*
Asst. Prof. Department of Mass Communication
Doon Business School
Selaqui, Dehradun

Nelatphal Chanda **
Asst. Prof. Dept. of Mass Communication
Himgiry Zee University
Dehradun

Abstract

Agenda setting theory is basically a theory of strong media effects that suggests that with the passage of time the media agenda becomes the public agenda. According to Agenda Setting theory if a news item is covered frequently and prominently the audience will regard the issue as more important. Thus a positive correlation can be established between exposure of the issue into the media and their public recognition. The present paper aimed to investigate the role of mass media in setting agenda for women empowerment with two folded perspectives.

The first part of the present paper presents theoretical aspects of agenda setting theory and tries to find out the agenda setting role of the mass media (news media) and the second part analyses how mass media can play an active role in highlighting the consequences of declining sex ratio.

On the basis of a number of researches conducted worldwide it has been found that media has power to set public agenda. From the perspective of agenda setting theory it can be induced that mass media can play a very effective role in women empowerment by highlighting women issues. Declining sex ratio has become a matter of serious concern and is it directly related to the status of women in society and deep rooted gender inequality. Mass media can play a vital role in creating mass awareness on this issues.
INTRODUCTION

The origin of the Agenda Setting Theory dates back to publication of ‘The agenda setting function of mass media’ in 1972 in Public Opinion Quarterly by Drs. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. This theory was developed as a study on the 1968 presidential election where Democratic incumbent Lyndon B. Johnson was ousted by Republican challenger Richard Nixon. Known as the “Chapel Hill Study”. 100 residents of Chapel Hill, North Carolina on what they thought were the most important issues of the election how that compared to what the local and national media reported were the most important issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Agenda setting theory which occupy an important place in the domain of media effect theory, is basically a theory of strong media effects. According to the Agenda Setting theory, with the passage of time the media agenda becomes the public agenda. According to Agenda Setting theory if a news item is covered frequently and prominently the audience will regard the issue as more important. Thus, the theory supports that mass media has the power to set the agenda of the people. According to the agenda-setting theory, mass media have an effect on public opinion. The Agenda Setting Function of the Mass Media, is another name of this theory. It suggest that the media sets the public agenda by telling people what to think about, although not exactly what to think.

After a long period of four decades, Bernard Cohen presented his idea in 1963 by saying: “Press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling readers what to think about” (pp.232-233).

McCombs and Shaw (1972) tested the notion that the mass media influence public perception about the important issues of the day through their daily selection and display of the news in their news bulletin etc. A reasonable number of studies have been conducted on the agenda-setting theory. (Rogers, Dearing, and Bregman (1993)

Iyengar and Kinder (1987) conducted a series of controlled experiments in which participants viewed television news programs that had been designed to highlight some issues, such as national defense or pollution of the environment. When the participants' ranking of the importance of these experimentally manipulated issues was compared to the salience for them with the other issues of the day, clear agenda-setting effects were found.

An Overview on the Status of Women in India:

Since independence India is emerging as a leading developing nation in the world. After independence our country has attained growth and development in almost all the spheres,
but if we look at the gender equality it provides a very unsatisfactory picture. Women are facing problems in every sphere of life whether employment, education, access to health care or property rights. No doubt the government of India has initiated a number of policy measures to eradicate gender inequality, but still it has to go a long mile. Women empowerment in India is still a distant dream. There still exists a wide gap between the goals enunciated in the constitution, legislation, policies, plans and programs on the one hand and the ground reality on the other hand. Gender based discrimination exists in the society which restricts the role of the women. Women are considered inferior to men.

The declining sex ratio in India amply portrays the discrimination shown towards women at the stage of birth. Women may be have stardom in any stream but are getting. The need for women empowerment was felt in India long back by many social thinkers. At the Second Round Table Conference, Mahatma Gandhi had announced that his aim was to establish a political society in which there would be no distinction between people of high and low classes and in which women would enjoy the same rights as men and the teeming millions of India would be ensured dignity and justice-social economic and political.

The Alarming Sex Ratio and Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao Scheme

Sex ratio is used to describe the number of females per 1000 of males. Sex ratio is a valuable source for finding the population of women in India and what is the ratio of women to that of men in India. In the Population Census of 2011 it was revealed that the population ratio in India 2011 is 940 females per 1000 of males. The Sex Ratio 2011 shows an upward trend from the census 2001 data. Census 2001 revealed that there were 933 females to that of 1000 males. Since decades India has seen a decrease in the sex ratio 2011, but since the last two of the decades there has been a slight increase in the sex ratio. Since the last five decades the sex ratio has been moving around 930 of females to that of 1000 of males. (Census Report, 2011) The state of Haryana has the lowest rate of sex ratio in India and the figure shows a number of 877 of females to that of 1000 of males.

“Government has introduced a new scheme called Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, which will help in generating awareness and improving the efficiency of delivery of welfare services meant for women with an initial corpus of Rs 100 crore. The Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley announced in his Budget Speech that government would focus on campaigns to sensitize people of this country towards the concerns of the girl child and women. He said that the process of sensitization must begin early and therefore the school curriculum must have a separate chapter on gender mainstreaming.” (PIB, 2014) http://pib.nic.in/newssite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=106348

‘Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Yojana’ has come into existence due to sharp decline in the number of females per thousand males is a matter of chief concern in recent decade. The percentage of sex selective abortion is on increase that has led to sharp decrease in the number of females in certain states of India. ‘Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Yojana’ or save the girl child is a new scheme introduced to reduce this gender selective fetus killing.

The Agenda Setter’s Role
On the basis of a number of researches conducted worldwide it has been found that media has power to set public agenda. From the perspective of agenda setting theory it can be induced that mass media can play a very effective role in creating awareness on women empowerment by highlighting women issues. Women empowerment has become very pertinent issue of the democracy and social justice. It is the responsibility of governments, educational institutions, and non-governmental organisations to work for the prevention of all forms of discrimination against women and to pave the way for their empowerment. But in this Twenty First century where media is all pervasive it is also necessary to look at the role of media in this process. The responsibility of the mass media is also big in this issue. In the dissemination and interpretation of a lot of knowledge, innovation and the news, the effect of media is very large.

Imbalance in the sex ration or the causes of decreasing sex ratio is deeply rooted in our socio-cultural practices and rituals. Still our society is engulfed with in the shackles of dowry system. The practice of dowry may be an important factor of declining sex ration.

It also reflects the attitude towards the girl child. According to the Census data 2011, there has been a sharp decline in sex ratio (child sex ratio) in Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Uttarakhand. According to the report the drop rate in the sex ratio is more in the rural areas as compared to the urban areas of the country which is a matter of serious concern. It reveals a bitter truth that still after 68 years of independence we have failed to bring real socio-economic development in the rural India and the people in the rural area are still under the clutches of orthodox attitude which needs to be eradicated by spreading awareness and inculcating scientific spirit.

Decline in the number of females per thousand male has been one of the most important issues to have emerged in recent times. It has become a very pertinent issue of the democracy, social justice and women empowerment. “The two major components to achieve the target of the programme are the mass communication campaign on the programme through interlinked national, state and district level interventions with community level actions in 100 districts, bringing together different stakeholders for accelerating impact.” (Yojana, Jan, 2015). The policy document put emphasis on advocacy, communication mobilisation and awareness generation. “One of the strategies worked out to achieve the goals of this scheme is Implementation of sustained social mobilisation and communication campaign to create equal value for the girl child and promote her education.” (Yojana, Jan, 2015)

Media play a pivotal role in disseminating information and creating awareness on socio-economic and political issues. In this Twenty First Century, media (electronic, print and social) has become the most powerful tool of communication increased and awareness generation. Media has to present a very responsible role for our society. Without the media, people in societies would be isolated, not only from the rest of the world, but also for the information world.

The digital media or the social media has become a potent tool to spread awareness in the modern society on different issues, may it be political, social or economic and giving us latest sight about what is happening in our world. An analysis of the content of newspapers, and television programs, will reveal the fact that for the sake of publicity and
selling they are focusing more on entertainment and sensational stories rather than highlighting developmental news. Unimportant and irrelevant news, that usually have no importance are given priority as a result of that relevant socio-economic issues remain unlighted. Media has also been criticized for not providing equal space to the women. It has been recognized worldwide that in order to achieve national development in true sense of the term women empowerment is very much necessary. But it is very unfortunate that media is not showing interest in covering the issues related to women’s socio-economic and political emancipation.

Indian media needs to be sensitized to gender issues. It should play proactive role in inculcating gender sensitivity in the country and should ensure that women are not depicted in poor light. It should devote special slots for crime against women in India and discuss all proactive aspects. The challenge before media is to move beyond clubbing what happens to women with routine crime briefs, on the one hand, and sensational stories, on the other. Media should take a proactive role in creating public awareness on the rights and privileges of women. Constitutional and legal rights should also be advertised and discussed regularly. (Review of The Press in India (2008 to 2012) http://presscouncil.nic.in/WriteReadData/Pdf/ReviewofthePressinIndia.pdf)

Media has tremendous power. It can pave the way for women’s emancipation, at the same time it can widen the existing gender inequality. If media highlights the positive role of the women apart from focusing on their problems it can be a partner in women empowerment. But, if it only focusses on traditional and stereotype role or images of women, it may become a factor of widening gender inequality. In a democratic country like India, media should act as a friend philosopher and guide of the government and the society. At this present critical juncture, soldering its social responsibility, media should join hand with government, NGOs and civil society to inject and spread the message of ‘Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao’.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the above mentioned studies it can be concluded that the mass media can play a pivotal role in changing the minds of the people towards girl child which can play an important role in balancing the sex ratio. Newspapers should publish more and more stories on declining sex ratio. Television channels have their own role in this regard. They should focus more on organizing debate on the issue. Because of the agenda setting role of mass media, the media agenda becomes the public agenda with the passage of time. In Indian democracy media has a great responsibility which is deeply associated with the socio economic conditions. But, if we look at the present scenario of representation of women in the media it will provide a very dissatisfactory picture. It has been found that media not provide balanced portrayal of women.

Media influences society directly or indirectly. Apart from providing information, media also help to form opinions and make judgments regarding various issues. Media can be considered as "watch dog" of political democracy. But a number of critics have raised question on the role played by media so far as the coverage of women issues is concerned. Media these days, tries to eye the news, which could help them to sell the information.
Since media is the main source of information, it can play a crucial role in forming and reflecting public opinion. It is even regarded "mirror" and "molder" of public opinion, meaning that the public copies or follows as well as assembles thoughts and judgments through the media and the information it displays.
References


