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Coverage of Drug Addiction in Print Media in Kashmir, India

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Abstract:

Print media represents the most readily available and potentially economical means of imparting information about the important social issues. Drug addiction is one such alarming social issue that is touching at the root of very existence in the contemporary society.

In this backdrop, this research, has attempted to study the extent and nature of news coverage given to issues like drug addiction in local broadsheet newspapers of Kashmir. For the purpose of analysis the study has been divided in to two parts. Part-one involves the quantitative approach and the second part includes the qualitative approach.

In part one, content analysis method has been applied to study three newspapers i.e. Urdu daily Aftab, Greater Kashmir and the Rising Kashmir (English dailies). Part two involved textual analyses of news stories from the same newspapers.

After thorough study, number of selected stories have been short listed. Twelve news stories have been selected at random out of total number of drug addiction based stories.

Moreover, the research aimed to test different hypothesis posed at the beginning of the study. The findings which emerged out of the study have confirmed the entire three hypothesis.

The first assumption, for instance, states, "Drug addiction receives considerable representation in Print media of Kashmir,".

This hypothesis has been proved from the comprehensive content analysis conducted in this research. The researcher has observed that media concern about drug abuse appeared to have increased from the beginning of the study period.

This study has further brought to the fore that consumption of charas tops the list out of different illicit drugs. The almost daily report of seizure of substances of abuse like charas in the local press is a clear indicator that the menace is touching new heights. Hence the findings prove our first hypothesis.

The second hypothesis which states, 'Newspaper reportage portrays youth as prime drug abusers' is also confirmed. Quantitative data in the study indicates that drug addiction has increased among youth over the period of four years (study period). The fact is also substantiated by qualitative analysis of stories wherein there has been frequent mention of youth either as drug user or drug trafficker. According to these news stories youth in their early 20s and late 30s seems to consume illicit drugs. The stories further revealed that drugs are not used for recreational purpose but as coping mechanism to deal with the stress of conflict.

It is perceived that females have also become part of the growing drug takers.

The final assumption in the hypothesis states that the Print media can play a pro-social role in generating awareness about drug addiction. The final assumption has also been proved to be true.

Moreover, the op-ed page (the page opposite to editorial page) which is mainly meant for citizens to voice their concern on different issues carried series of articles on the illicit consumption of alcohol. The study suggests that such articles can play a key role in moulding the public opinion about the long-term ill effects of drug abuse.

The other important findings which emerged from qualitative analysis of content of news genres reveal that the drug abuse is stereotypically presented as a threat to our culture and society.

On these important social problems, they have significantly contributed to setting the national agenda and guided the government in framing policies in negotiating these issues.

1. Introduction

An accelerated development of the global commercial media system dominated by transnational media conglomerate has brought tremendous changes in the spectrum of contemporary media. This market driven media system is generally oriented to the interests of their audience as 'consumers' of information and entertainment. Since the market treats its audience as 'consumers' instead of citizens, public service function is outside its purview.

With the multiplicity of entertainment and news media in the contemporary media scenario, affected by factors like globalization, commercialization and privatization, media content finds itself drastically altered. Public service issues in society pertaining to health, education, governance and cultural aspects of life are experiencing lesser significance.

Media industry while adopting capitalist model of production is increasingly becoming market driven. Hence, glamour, sensationalism, consumerism and other related extrinsic factors find themselves prioritized in the media. In fact, depending on the location, ownership and funding perspectives media focus on politics or other issues.

There is no denying that press also faces challenges to perform public service role due to its growing alignment with big business. Nevertheless, as a source of news and information, the press is still unequalled by other media. Print media as compared to electronic media has provided substantial space to social issues of vital importance. Print media represents the most readily available and potentially economical means of imparting information about the potent social and health issues like drug addiction, HIV/AIDS prevention etc.

Against this backdrop, this study attempts to study the media treatment of ever burgeoning issue of drug addiction which is touching at the root of very existence in the contemporary society. The United Nations Narcotics Bureau describes international drug abuse as the worst epidemic in the global history. South Asia continues to be largest producer of illicit drugs owing to the world's two main opium producing areas, the golden crescent and golden triangle.

From Burma to AF-Pak to the Gulf, across Asia, Africa and America, Conflict is a global phenomenon in the contemporary international scenario. Kashmir is no exception. Given the Socio-political situation in the last twenty years' media have been heavily concentrating on conflict related issues in Kashmir.

In the backdrop of this perception, questions arise as to whether media are fulfilling their role pertaining to social responsibility in the socio-political, economic and other aspects of society.

The present study, thus, intended to find answers to these questions by studying the trends in coverage and representation of news related to drug addiction in the three local dailies of Kashmir i.e. Aftab, Greater Kashmir and Rising Kashmir.

From the current sample of news messages, the study conducted over the period of four years i.e. 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011 has brought to the fore that number of articles devoted to drugs has increased markedly in regional newspapers. Moreover, the drug abuse has assumed alarming proportion particularly amongst youth.

The study has revealed that print media concern about drug addiction has increased from the beginning of the study period. However, there is need to make further improvements in order to develop effective campaign messages. This research study has also attempted to provide inputs to Government for the development of policies and also help the media to conform to its social obligations.

2. Purpose of Selecting Print Media

Newspaper is an organ of persuasion and therefore plays a key role in changing public opinion and attitudes on social issues. This can be brought about by intentional advocacy. -editorials, columns, interpretive articles, which are intended to guide and advise the reader. Print media provides lot of space to social marketers having the goal of inducing social change by performing public service functions. For instance, social advertising dealing with different goals like reducing cigarette smoking or the substance abuse, prevention of AIDS/HIV intends to induce long-term behavioural changes in the target population.¹

The informational content of the media can have a profound influence on public opinion. Hadley Cantril in 'Gauging Public Opinion' has pointed out that news stories may be a potent force in shaping public attitudes than editorials and political columns. However, according to Bernard Berelson, the importance of an event in persuading public may be sharpened considerably by the interpretations provided by editorial writers and political columnists.

2.1. Drug Addiction in Kashmir

Today perhaps there is no parts of the world free from the curse of drug addiction and drug trafficking. Kashmir is emerging as a fertile ground for drug addiction. Its deceptively tranquil environs are caught in a vicious circle of drug abuse with the number of addicts increasing day by day. The socio-political turmoil since 1989 and the rise of power struggle is one contributing factor.

The culture of drug abuse is not entirely new to the region. From time immemorial, charas, a local plant used for obtaining drugs was popular. Charas is resin from the flowering tops of Cannabis plants. After a simple treatment, this was smoked generally through clay water pipe called chillum.

Sometimes charas was smoked in tobacco cigars or cigarettes. According to old tales, especially in district Anantnag, charas takayas (secluded place of charas addicts) were well entrenched. Hermits or wandering minstrels, who remained outside the ambit of formal religious bodies and exercised their 'freedom' to find oneness with eternity, also smoked hashish, another addictive substance. The state of illusion it produced was touted as the 'realized state' being pursued by its protagonists. They remained alienated from the material world and immersed in this self-defined 'sacred' state of existence.

According to a renowned educationist of Kashmir, Prof A.G Madhosh, during the 1970s and 1980s, at least 42 places were identified in the district Anantnag as a seat of Charas takayas.

Charas-smokers were somehow socially acceptable. Their philosophy and way of life remained confined within their groups which were on the periphery of society. Beyond these groups of self-proclaimed religious men, charas smoking did not have many takers in society. This can be gauged from the fact that only a miniscule of the youth population, nearly two to three per cent falling in the age group of 18-30, were substance abusers during that period. Sadly, this changed and gradually drug addiction struck its roots almost in every part of Kashmir. Though not widely prevalent, the insidious practice had found pockets in Kashmiri society way back in the 1960s and 1970s but remained much on the margins of society.

Further, the nearly two decades of unrest since 1989 has taken an unmistakably heavy toll on Kashmiri society. Along with the political implications of the situation, there surely has been a serious impact on the social, emotional, psychological and cultural milieu of Kashmir. People in Kashmir resort to drugs just to cope up stress and anxiety born out of destruction of social fabric of Kashmiri society. Moreso, due to perpetual stress arising out of declining economic growth, unemployment, destruction of life and property, the majority of Kashmiri youth found refuge in some kind of artificial solace.

Normally Women do not have direct access to the more prevalent drugs. Instead they use Substance like white fluid (commonly used in offices for erasing printed errors) and boot polish. According to doctors in the Baramulla district hospital an astounding 40% of population is involved in drug abuse.

The complex connection between drug use, delinquency and crime has been observed in Kashmir. More, surprisingly, School children being a less risky group are employed for harvesting and processing addictive crops. There is direct link between drug abusers among school going children and increasing dropout rate in Baramulla.

This social evil threatening the lives of thousands of people across Kashmir is patronized by a flourishing nexus of illicit drug dealers, small scale narcotic producers and market networks.

3. Findings

According to the study, drug addiction receives considerable representation in Print media of Kashmir. The significant findings which emerged from the current sample of news messages indicates that over the period of four years (the study period 2008 to 2011) number of articles devoted to drugs has increased in the local newspapers under study.

Moreover, in terms of the space allocated to the relevant content under study, this researcher has observed that all the three selected newspapers provided considerable space to the issue of drug addiction. Both Greater Kashmir and Rising Kashmir published detailed news items in the form of articles, whereas Urdu daily Aftab had more short and medium sized news stories. For instance, in the year 2008, Aftab published a total of 20 news items that measured 1044.5 cm sq. In the year 2011, the number of news items increased to 43 and the total space occupied by all the stories were 2512.2cmsq. Total space occupied by drugs related material in case of 'Rising Kashmir' in the year 2011 was 5421cmsq, whereas 40 news items of Greater Kashmir measured 5369 cm sq in the same year.

This study has further brought to the fore that consumption of charas tops the list out of different illicit drugs. The almost daily report of seizure of substances of abuse like charas in the local press is a clear indicator that the menace is touching new heights.

Data in the study indicates that drug addiction has increased among youth over the period of four years (study period). The fact is also substantiated by qualitative analysis of stories wherein there has been frequent mention of youth either as drug user or drug trafficker. Unlike Greater Kashmir and Rising Kashmir, Urdu daily Aftab has not mentioned age group of youth. However, age group figures in only few stories of Greater Kashmir and Rising Kashmir. According to these news stories youth in their early 20s and late 30s seems to consume illicit drugs. The stories further revealed that drugs are not used for recreational purpose but as coping mechanism to deal with the stress of conflict.

Print media can play a pro-social role in generating awareness about drug addiction. In a newspaper, 'letters to the editor' provide a forum for readers to voice their views. In this context the analysis of relevant content of 'letters to editor' reveals that readers concern towards drug addiction has increased over the study period. From the data available the researcher has found that Greater Kashmir received large number of letters as feedback on drug addiction followed by Rising Kashmir and Urdu daily Aftab. This reveals the level of awareness among people about drug addiction. It also indicates that media influences the public opinion and develops positive attitudes among people.

Moreover, the op-ed page which is mainly meant for citizens to voice their concern on different issues carried series of articles on the illicit consumption of alcohol. The study suggests that such articles can play a key role in moulding the public opinion about the long-term ill effects of drug abuse.

The other important findings which emerged from qualitative analysis of content of news genres reveal that the drug abuse is stereotypically presented as a threat to our culture and society. The causes or the context of such problems are seldom analyzed in the news reports of the Urdu daily Aftab and hardly ever explained in terms of socio-political context.

Although 'Aftab' has provided extensive coverage to issues pertaining to drug addiction, this researcher has observed a redundancy in its news reports. Most of the stories are based on the press releases from the Police department. On the other hand, this researcher has observed that Greater Kashmir and Rising Kashmir provided extensive coverage to the issue under study. There is in-depth analysis of the issue pertaining to drug addiction in the news stories as well.

Newspapers play a key role in changing public opinion on social issues through incisive reporting and analytical articles. On these important social problems, they have significantly contributed to setting the national agenda and guided the government in framing policies in negotiating these issues.

This research has attempted to study the print media coverage of a vital contemporary social issue of drug addiction in Kashmir. It has also tried to provide inputs for the development of policies and also help media to conform to its social obligations. Interestingly, the social significance of this research topic has brought to the fore that there is great potential to carry out this study on a larger scale and offer more valuable policy recommendations.

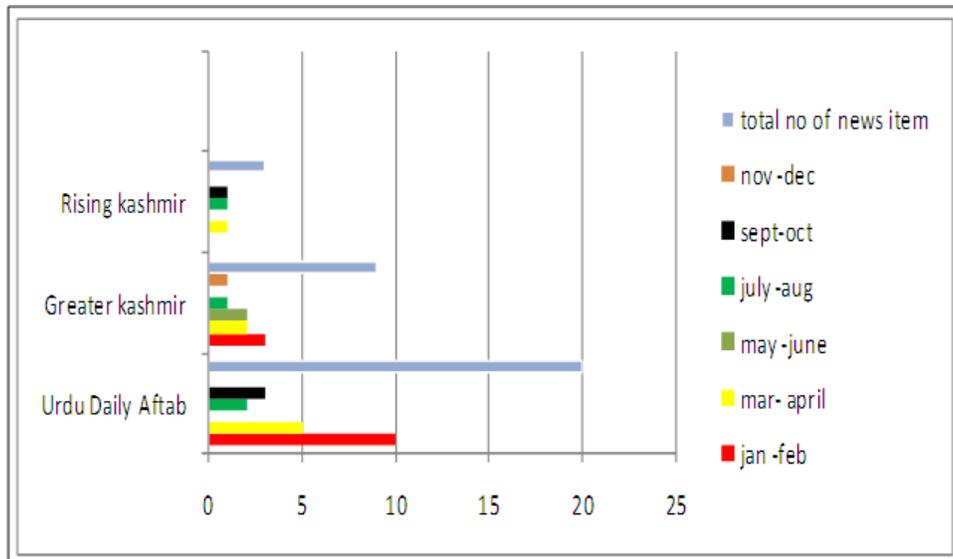


Figure 1: Graphic representation of news stories based on Drug Addiction in the year 2008

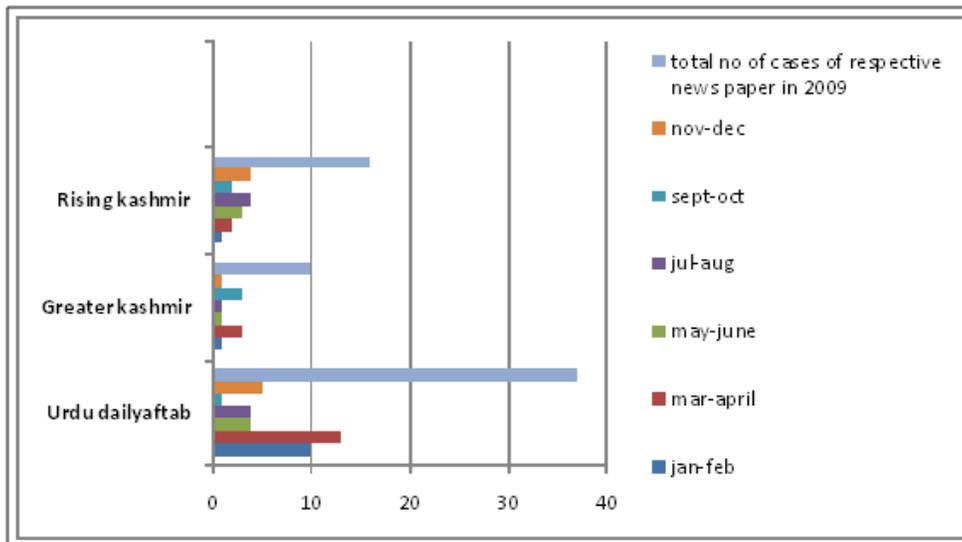


Figure 2: Graphic representation of coverage of Drug Addiction in newspapers in the year 2009

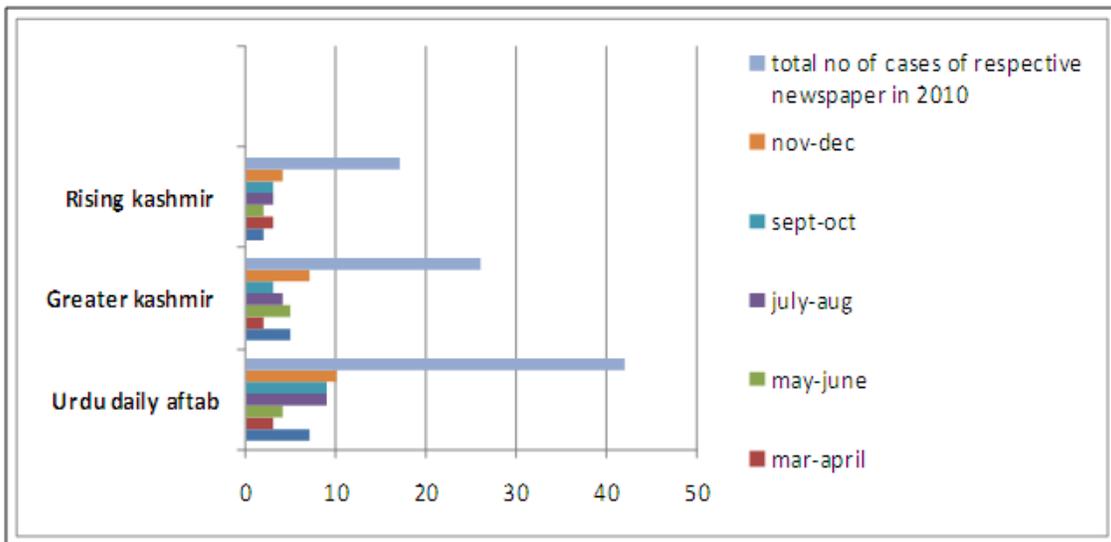


Figure 3: Graphic representation of coverage of Drug Addiction in newspapers in the year 2010

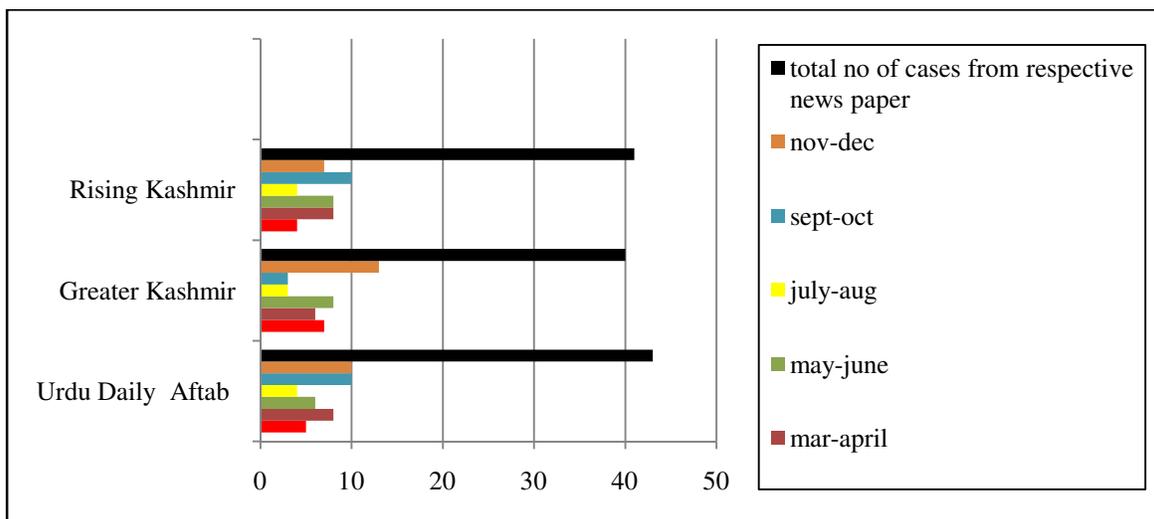


Figure 4: Graphic representation of coverage of Drug Addiction in newspapers in 2011

The percentage of most frequently reported illicit drugs in the press

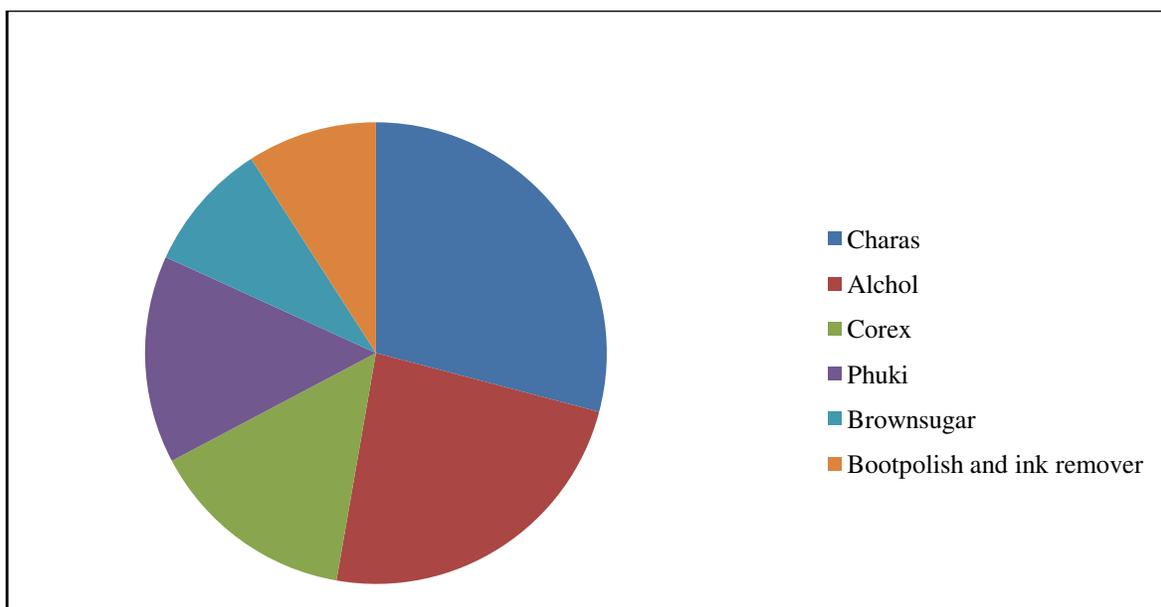


Figure 5

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