Media Reflection of Regional Subcultures: Looking at Social Construction of Cultural Identity

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The purpose of this research is to study how people from different regional subcultures perceive the portrayal of their own cultural identities by the media and whether they endorse the stereotypes representing their subculture or challenge it. A survey of 127 respondents belonging to different regional subcultures of India was undertaken using a questionnaire to determine their opinion regarding their community's portrayal by media, and the consequent shaping of others' opinions about them. The theoretical basis for this study is Social Constructionism theory, which has been used here to examine the construction of stereotypes of the various subcultures in India by the media and personal experiences coupled with messages from other individuals/sources, thus creating a jointly constructed shared understanding of a particular cultural identity. The study found that the majority of the respondents do not identify themselves with the cultural identity that is constructed by the media and opine that most media portrayals are stereotypical, thus leading to a skewed understanding of specific subcultures. Another important finding is that respondents jointly attributed the formation of stereotypes to media messages, information from family/peers and personal experience, thus validating the author's argument that stereotypes are a result of social constructionism.

Keywords: Cultural identity, media, regional communities, social construction, stereotypes, subculture

Stereotyping is a phenomenon that occurs without conscious awareness, one that allows categorization of people into specific groups with specific traits and attributes. The term "stereotype" though earlier used to refer to "an image perpetuated without change", it was Walter Lippman who first used it in the psycho-social context in his work "Public Opinion." A stereotype is a socially shared set of beliefs about traits that are characteristic of members of a social category (Greenwald, 1995). According to McGarty et al., (2002), there are three principles that guide work on social psychology of stereotyping: (i) stereotypes are aids to explanation, (ii) stereotypes are energy-saving devices and (iii) stereotypes are shared group beliefs.

As a natural psychological process, social categorization and stereotyping helps the human mind to be prepared for the unknown, thus helping it to identify either possible threat or an assurance of security.

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Cultural Identities within India

Cross-cultural comparative studies mostly have been based on the assumption of cultural homogeneity that equates culture with nation. This assumption overlooks the cultural diversity that might exist within a nation (Panda, 2004). India, though seen as a homogenous cultural unit beyond its borders, is in fact an amalgamation of several diverse subcultures within it. These subgroups differ from one another not just on the basis of religious parameters, but also on the basis of factors like caste, sub-caste, linguistic and regional characteristics. Each of these subgroups or sub-cultures, therefore, possesses a distinct cultural identity. When it comes to each unique sub-culture, the members within that sub-culture consider themselves as the "in-group" while all others are considered as "out-groups", and specific characteristics that markedly separate the "in-group" from the out-groups are held in high esteem by the members of the in-group.

India is home to hundreds of unique cultural identities, making it a herculean task for any one individual to have complete and accurate information about each one. As is the tendency with stereotyping, in an environment that contains too much information, the most adaptive response by the perceiver is to attempt to reduce this information overload by filtering out or ignoring much of it (McGarty, 2002).

Intergroup differentiation based on selective parameters and the accompanying implicit cognitive stereotyping among these subcultures is therefore, an inevitable consequence, which eventually leads to the conscious "affective" component of prejudice coming into play, followed by discrimination, the behavioural component. If any such stereotype carries with it significant negative traits that are frequently highlighted in social situations and media messages, the people subjected to such stereotyping have to often cope with isolation, social stigma and hostility from members of other subcultures.

Stereotyping of Indian Sub-Cultures

Though cultural stereotyping within India is not a recent phenomenon, it is to be noted that in the past, they were limited to a certain geographical area that was home to members of only their own sub-culture. This may have perpetuated existing perceptions and stereotypes about other cultures within each sub-culture, over generations; yet did not create situations for interpersonal or social conflict since there was minimal interaction and communication among members of different sub-cultures. Globalization, urbanization and technology have brought a drastic change to this scenario. Better job opportunities in both public and private sector organizations and better chances of earning pushed several individuals out of the comfort of their own home community to move out and explore. The rise of metro cities has given rise to populations that are a miniature replica of the nation in terms of cultural diversity. This has resulted in environments which are host to constant intercultural interaction, thus giving space for stereotyping to be expressed as behaviour and attitudes. But lack of a proper understanding of each other's cultures lead to misunderstanding and friction, thus preventing the creation of social harmony.

Though media has also grown phenomenally, there is little awareness about India's rich diversity, and media messages are taken at face value by the message receivers, i.e., audiences. While electronic media is at the helm of propagating stereotypical portrayals of various communities, digital media is not far behind. For a common viewer/message receiver, it is not possible to differentiate whether the portrayal is accurate or not. The democratization of communication through internet, however, has empowered the emergence of counter opinions too, that challenge existing stereotypes.

The purpose of this research study is to gauge how people from different regional-linguistic subcultures perceive the portrayal of their cultural identities by the media and whether they endorse the stereotypes/portrayal representing their community or challenge it. This paper also intends to highlight the role of the media in reinforcing regional-linguistic stereotypes, leading to a skewed understanding of specific subcultures.

Literature Review

Most studies related to inter-cultural communication have been carried out between different nationalities, with people of each nationality considered as a 'culture.' Similarly, no previous studies with respect to stereotyping of regional-linguistic communities within India are available. Berreman (1972) found that stereotypes and indicators of ethnic identity were closely related, and that individuals attempt to safeguard their cultural identities by conveying statuses appropriate and beneficial for themselves in particular contexts, as a response to other relevant or stigmatized groups in a relative sense. Successful intercultural interaction thus depends on the kind of meanings attached by each group to certain attributes and behaviours, and their subsequent manipulation, that helps them maintain their own identity, and this forms the crux of urban social organization. According to Berreman, actual interactions in the physical space that give rise to such relations help to define social entities whose behavior can be predicted, but these assumptions cannot be made about those of alien ethnic identity.

Panda and Gupta (2004) in their paper "Mapping Cultural Diversity within India: A Meta-analysis of Some Recent Studies" note in their review of previous empirical studies that "there are seven pan-Indian cultural preferences: (i) collectivist orientation; (ii) respect for status and power; (iii) primacy of personalized relationship; (iv) desire to be embedded in an in-group; (v) familism; (vi) context-sensitive (situational) behaviour; and (vii) cynical view about others." However, the study also revealed cultural preferences unique to a location. The authors argue that cultural change is context sensitive and depends on the historical and cultural legacy inherited by a location.

According to T.K. Oommen (2004), "In India, people inhabiting the territory of most states are drawn from different racial, religious and linguistic backgrounds. This has occurred through conquest, colonisation and immigration. Secondly, interstate migration is an ongoing process, thereby rendering most societies racially and socio-culturally heterogeneous." India, being a polyglot society, with more than 2000 languages and dialects recorded in the 1932 census, and varying counts in later census studies proves the value of language as an identity marker in India. Thus, it is no wonder that such diversity must give rise to assumptions about the "other".

In the context of intercultural communication and interaction, communication difficulties and cultural barriers may evoke adverse emotions that, in turn, give rise to prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviours. (Spencer-Rogers et. al., 2002) "Intercultural communication affect is the strongest unique predictor of attitudes that constitutes a significant source of prejudice and discrimination toward other ethno linguistic out-groups, such as racial/ethnic minority and immigrant groups. Factors such as accented speech, cultural differences in non-verbal communication styles, and cultural variations in values, norms, and customs contribute to these communication problems. Intercultural interact ants may also fear the negative consequences of communication failures and emotionally laden cultural misunderstandings. This antecedent of intergroup attitudes is especially relevant in international contexts and multicultural societies and

being directly associated with communication between ethno linguistic groups, and can be a potent source of intergroup hostility."

Not much research has been done on the stereotyping of regional subcultures in India by the media except for a few analyses of trends in cinema. Most studies mention stereotyping of regional communities in passing, rather than give a detailed account of them. Nandy (1981) says that "social particulars enter the popular film solely as gross stereotypical details. Defying modern modes of cultural expression, the more stereotyped a character in such a movie, the more socially embedded he or she is. The angry, conservative, loud-mouthed father of the heroine may have an upper-caste name like Mr Verma or Thakursahib, the local drunk may speak with an identifiably Bengali or Tamilian accent, and the night-club manager may have a typical Goan Christian name like Mr Pinto, but the hero will simply be Mr Rakesh or Mr Raj or Mr Ashok—surname less and, thus, region less, casteless, ethnically non-identifiable and ultimately a historical. All subsidiary characters are representatives of specific themes and types, chiefly the ones which are particularly negative or particularly positive."

Some studies have explored the portrayal of Hindu-Muslim relations in Hindi films (Jain, 2011) and that of Christianity (Harsh, 2014). But portrayal of specific communities in mainstream media is limited to few ethnicities, such as Tamilians (Mudliar, 2015; Karupiah, 2016). The role of media in stereotyping ethnic communities has been researched only with respect to Indian immigrants in western countries and Indian diaspora. Thus, there is a lack of sufficient literature and scientific research on mutual stereotyping among regional ethnic communities/linguistic subcultures within India, and the role of media in propagating the same.

Research Questions

  (i)   Do Indians living in multicultural environments within India face stereotyping based on regional/linguistic cultural identities?
  (ii) What are the factors that contribute to stereotyping and how great a role do the media play in reinforcing/perpetuating stereotypes?
  (iii) Do respondents endorse the media portrayal of their regional cultural identity or do they challenge it as stereotypical?

Theoretical Framework

This study uses the theoretical framework of social constructionism to interpret the building of stereotypes in society. Social constructionism, (also called social construction of reality), is both a sociological and communicative theory that examines the development of jointly constructed understandings of the world that form the basis for shared assumptions about reality. In attempting to make sense of the social world, social constructionists view knowledge as constructed as opposed to created- that "reality is socially negotiated" (Raskin, 2002).

Social constructionism also aims to 'problematize' reality, i.e., consider the very issues that appear 'self-evident' and uninteresting under normal circumstances as 'problematic'. Stereotyping has existed earlier in India, but the creation of circumstances that provide for ample intercultural interaction within the nation was absent earlier. The present circumstances in which, information is received not from one source, but multiple sources, gives rise to social constructionism of stereotypes, where the "joint" construction

may occur not only from personal experiences of the individual, but also information received from family or other individuals, and media messages. Mass media plays an extremely important role in social construction of stereotypes as it permeates the life of every individual today.

Methodology

The research method adopted for this study was the Survey method, utilizing the descriptive approach. The population for the study consisted of Indian citizens belonging to various states (thus ensuring regional and linguistic demarcation in cultural identities) who are either settled in metropolitan cities and towns with multicultural environments in their own state or elsewhere and those who are either presently working, or, have been exposed in the past, to multicultural work/academic environments.

A sample of 127 respondents was chosen through purposive sampling technique, of which, 66 were female and 61 were male. Respondents who answered the questionnaire belonged to the following various regional/linguistic cultural identities: Tamil (Tamil Nadu), Telugu (Andhra Pradesh/Telangana), Kannada (Karnataka), Malayalam (Kerala), Marathi (Maharashtra), Oriya (Odisha/Orissa), Bengali (West Bengal), Gujarati (Gujarat), Rajasthani (Rajasthan), Bihari (Bihar), Hindi (Uttar Pradesh), Punjabi (Punjab), Goan (Goa), Sindhi (ethnic roots in East Pakistan), Assamese (Assam) and Manipuri (Manipur).

The age of the participants ranged between 18 and 64, of which the highest number of participants belonged to the '25-34' age bracket (49.57 per cent).

The research instrument used was an online questionnaire with 26 questions, of which 22 were questions on stereotyping and perceptions of media portrayal by self and others, and 4 questions collected demographic details.

Of the 22 questions that quizzed respondents on media portrayal of their cultural identity and experiences of being stereotyped, 15 were of 'yes/no' or multiple choice answer type. The rest were open ended questions.

Results and Discussion

The questionnaire was designed in such a way so as to assess the perceptions of self, i.e., one's own regional/linguistic cultural identity in comparison to perceptions of others and the messages conveyed by the media. The overall trends of the data gathered from the survey are presented below.

When asked if people from other communities always open to knowing/befriending them, of the 127 respondents, 102 respondents answered in the affirmative (80.31 per cent), while 25 answered in the negative (19.69 per cent). However, 44 respondents (34.65 per cent) admitted that they had experienced a situation where a person from another community has shown hesitation in building up an acquaintance/friendship with them, and this constitutes 1/3rd of the sample. 68 respondents (54.4 per cent) said that they had experienced situations wherein they had been assumed as belonging to a particular community within a short time of being introduced to a stranger, of which, 46 respondents (67.6 per cent) revealed that the assumptions had been wrong. This reveals that stereotyping based on regional identities is prevalent. The reasons for wrong assumptions were mainly attributed to physical features, such as "Thought to be a 'Madrasi' because of having dark skin and being vegetarian", "Punjabi/North Indian, because of fair skin and looks", "Bengali, because of dusky skin and eyes that slant up at the ends" and also language and diction—

"Bihari, because of language, slang and diction", "South Indian, because of accent". However, only 17.89 per cent of respondents said that they felt uneasy/ offended when mistaken to be belonging to a different community.

When asked what was the first thing that came to people's minds when they mentioned their community, 43 out of 105 respondents named food items, and a close second came names of prominent politicians, historical figures and movie celebrities, named by 30 respondents, out of the 105 respondents who answered this question. 23 responses mentioned festivals, rituals, temples/deities and historical monuments. Other responses included "ego", "miserliness", "attitudes", "dressing style" and negative news associated with the community, such as crimes. 77.24 per cent of respondents said that people from other communities claimed to know of their dressing/food preferences/ practices, etc., when they mentioned their community. When asked if the knowledge that the others possessed about their community was right, only 12.38 per cent answered in the affirmative, whereas 33.33 per cent answered "No" and 54.29 per cent of the respondents answered "Sometimes".

Based on their experiences of interacting with people from other states/regional communities, respondents were asked as to what were the factors generally attributed to by out-groups in the shaping of their perception of the respondent's cultural identity. Media portrayal emerged as the biggest factor (57.14 per cent), followed by "Observation/ Personal experience" (46.94 per cent) and "Information received from others(colleagues/ friends/peers)" (46.94 per cent) and finally, "Learnt from parents/family during childhood" (41.84 per cent).

While 41.18 per cent of respondents felt that they had faced instances of unfair discrimination, only 50 per cent of them (overall 20.59 per cent) felt that the discrimination was based on bias against their cultural identity.

While most respondents (69.23 per cent) answered that their community is represented in the media, 30.77 per cent of them felt that their community is either not represented at all or is grouped under a larger subset or another community without an individual identity, such as "Madrasis", "North Indians", "North-east" and "South Indians". Out of 104 respondents, 71 (68.27 per cent) respondents felt that their community had been stereotyped by the media, while 33 felt not(31.73 per cent), and 23 respondents skipped the question.

Out of 112 respondents, only 33.04 per cent agreed with the media portrayal of their community, while two-thirds of the sample (66.96 per cent) disagreed and 15 skipped the question. This proves that the majority of the population does not agree with the stereotypes represented in media. Supplementing this finding, a high majority (70.27 per cent) agreed that the opinion of other people about their community is based on its portrayal by the media. However, only 10.75 per cent of the respondents felt that the stereotype portrayed by media presented a positive image, while 45.16 per cent respondents believed that the media showed a positive image only "sometimes" and 44.09 per cent felt that the media portrayed a negative image through stereotype.

Responses to an open ended question on changes required in aspects portrayed by media with respect to a particular cultural identity were varied and thought-provoking, highlighting the resentment felt towards media for their ill-informed and inaccurate portrayal. Respondents belonging to the Marathi community mentioned that the constant portrayal of Maharashtrians as being either fishermen or maidservants should be avoided by the media. Goans, are shown to be always Christians, with a party/fun-loving attitude and no career.

Respondents belonging to Tamilian community opined that they were often portrayed as rude and unfriendly; as fans of the famous actor Rajnikanth; and shown wearing only traditional attire like *lungi* and *saree*, which is not the case. Also, extremes with respect to personality are shown, either as intelligent, but unattractive or as uneducated, dark-skinned criminals. Also, it is the characteristics and mannerisms of the Tamil community that is often shown to represent South Indian culture as a whole, and even when depicting Telugus, Malayalis or Kannadigas. The lack of command over any other language except Tamil, is also often emphasized.

Respondents of the Punjabi community opined that the portrayal of Punjabis as 'uneducated' drunkards and following the "eat-drink-sleep" motto was the most negative aspect. Men are shown as businessmen, but never following any other profession such as that of doctors, lawyers, etc. and women are shown as unintelligent, beauty-conscious housewives.

Respondents belonging to Gujarati community clarify that they are often stereotyped as stingy and miserly, wearing flashy clothes and usually as running a business, rather than any other profession. Similarly, the Bengali community is, overall considered to be consisting of fish food-lovers, intellectuals who are either artists, writers or media persons, with funny accents, revolutionary mindsets and dusky complexion.

Respondents native to Uttar Pradesh complained of extremities in depiction of women- as either too liberal in their lifestyle and choices, or too conservative, docile and demure. Bias against the girl child, criminal mentality of masses and drugs are also highlighted as characteristics often. Biharis are portrayed as talkative, argumentative, short tempered and loud. Rajasthani respondents pointed out their portrayal as unethical people and cheats is a wrong stereotype perpetuated by the media. The Marwari subset is portrayed as being conservative and shrewd businessmen. Sindhis, too, are shown as stingy and loud.

Respondents belonging to Kerala complained of being grouped under the "Tamilian" tag, and often shown as dark-skinned, having vegetarian meals like *idli-dosa-sambar,* running a wayside tea shop and shown as speaking English in a funny accent, and often becoming the subject of ridicule in media portrayal. The Kannadiga and Telugu respondents also complained of not being respresented in the media, and instead being blanketed under the common term of "South Indians" or identified as one with Tamilians, without a separate cultural identity. Additionally, Telugu speakers from Andhra are considered more soft-spoken, while those from Telangana are portrayed as rude, and their culture and accent portrayed in more negative shades. Kannadigas are known more for their cuisine and the famous actor "Rajkumar".

Assamese respondents resented the portrayal of their community members as security guards all the time, which is unrealistic and leads to creation of wrong perceptions. The positive aspects of the community such as being a liberal society without dowry system and child marriage, equal rights for women, and every household having its own toilets despite living in the most remote parts of the country, are never shown. Manipuri respondents pointed out the bracketing of all north-eastern states as one, and classifying them as "Chinese" in looks, while portraying them as a backward community, and the reference to consumption of dog-meat, were stereotypical and wrong.

Recommendations of survey respondents for change in the existing situation included suggestions that media professionals need to take cognizance that various cultures co-exist in a country like India. Portrayal change should be in terms of dress, language, appearance, and eating habits. There was a common demand from the respondents for

realistic portrayal of the culture without demeaning rituals and beliefs being highlighted. There was also a suggestion that the media must take on the responsibility to create awareness of the diversity of Indian culture while dispelling notions of 'differences' and 'conflict' that harm the fabric of a peaceful Indian society. Another suggestion was that the media must be more pluralistic and inclusive in its portrayal of Indian communities and ensure a balanced representation of people from all regional and linguistic communities rather than adhering to the outdated stereotypes that have been in vogue since decades.

The study could not include equal numbers of respondents from all the different communities which participated in the study. Also, the study could not draw any respondents from several states such as: Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Sikkim, Tripura, Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Chattisgarh and Haryana.

Conclusion

As multicultural microcosms are being created, so are arenas of stereotypical prejudice and discrimination appearing. The present study proves that despite better access to technology and information, especially through the internet, people are by and large ignorant of the characteristics of other regional linguistic communities and continue to hold on to stereotypical notions about them. The construction of these stereotypes arise from multiple factors, of which media plays the greatest role. It is evident that majority of the population find themselves being stereotyped in multicultural environments, and challenge the stereotypes of their cultural identity portrayed by the media. The findings reveal the need for a change in media portrayal, which is more relatable and adheres to reality, to promote greater understanding and acceptance among India's diverse subcultures.

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