



JIHĀT-UL-ISLĀM
Vol: 18, Issue: 01, Jul – Dec 2024

OPEN ACCESS
JIHĀT-UL-ISLĀM
pISSN: 1998-4472
eISSN: 2521-425X
www.jihat-ul-islam.com.pk

The Role of Media in Fostering Interfaith Harmony: A Research Study

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the dynamic impact of media on religious debates and its potential role in promoting interfaith harmony. Now a day's, media plays very important role in public perceptions & opinions, especially in matters related to religion. The study aims to understand how media influences religious debates and to propose guidelines for its constructive role. The research investigates the positive sides of media influence on interfaith relations. It proves cases of the media acting as a bridge-builder between religious communities or enhancing dialogue & interfaith harmony. This study seeks to draw on specific instances of success, to learn from them and highlight guiding principles for media practitioners in their efforts towards harmony amongst faith communities. It also analyses into the media aspect of preaching religious tolerance and respect being used as an educational tool to bring about understanding among different religions. Rather than continuing to create such tensions, media can also be used as an incredibly powerful tool in the way it compliments and opens dialogue between religious societies. The guidelines are intended to assist media professionals in making a positive contribution to interfaith harmony and the creation of an ever more inclusive and empathetic society. These guidelines emphasize the importance of balanced & unbiased reporting, avoiding sensationalism & promoting inclusive narratives.

Keywords: Media impact, Inter-faith harmony, Bridging gaps, Dialogue, Tolerance, Educational role, Building bridges.



i. Introduction:

Now a days, world has become a global village and people in different parts of the globe follow various religions, thus it becomes significant to know how the mass communication and social media can assist us in knowing and accepting other religious beliefs. Exploring this research, it will be seen how the media is involved in the process of maintaining peace with regard to doctrinal diversity especially when a particular issue develops controversies. Studying the effects that are caused by the media in our societies, we can understand how to educate people in respecting other's religion and becoming tolerant in accepting people that are of different religions. This study focuses on the concept of world peace and how the media can help in creation of this concept particularly through passing of tolerance, respect and inclusive stories.

ii. Research Method:

To conduct this study, I analyzed media coverage of religious incidents and controversies, especially the incident of b'abri Mosque (India), Incident of Gujr'at India, Murder of Governor Salman T'aseer (Pakistan), incident of S'āngla Hill & Jar'ānwala (Pakistan), Two times mob violence in Sialkot & other incidents. I examined how the main stream media & social media represented different religious groups and their beliefs. It also examined teachings on religious harmony from various faith traditions to identify common values that could serve as a foundation for building bridges of understanding.

iii. The Instructions of Religious Harmony:

In this diverse world, fighting for interfaith tolerance has become the goal of many people where people of different faiths come together to work together hoping for the same thing – tolerance. Each religion stresses love to the neighbors and people at large which may be utilized in order to improve the relations between peoples. By means of the open dialogue it means that people together, by overcoming the conflict, can accept enough of the very same values that are already present. In conclusion, one can imagine a society where people of different religious views are tolerant to one another and everyone's religious views add value to the society.

A. Teachings of Qur'ān for Religious Harmony:

The following verses explaining Qur'ānic stressing on welfare for unity harmony, justice, sympathy and diplomatic approach between human beings. For more detail information about any verse it is better to read an accurate translation of Qur'ān or the advice of any qualified scholars.

B. Respect of Human Beings:

“يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَىٰكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ”¹

"O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made your tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted."

C. Respect for other Faiths:

“لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ يَحْيَىٰ الدِّينَ يُحْيَىٰ الدِّينَ الرُّشْدُ مِنَ الْغَىِّ فَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِالطَّاغُوتِ وَيُؤْمِنْ بِاللَّهِ فَقَدِ اسْتَمْسَكَ بِالْعُرْوَةِ الْوُثْقَىٰ لَا انْفِصَامَ لَهَا وَاللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ”²

"There is no compulsion in religion. The right direction is henceforth distinct from error and he, who rejected false deities and believeth in Allah hath grasped a firm handhold which will never break."

D. Communication and Understanding:

“ادْعُ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحُكْمَةِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ وَجِدْ لَهُمْ يَأْتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنْ ضَلَّ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِالْمُنْتَدِينَ”³

"Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best. Indeed, your Lord is most knowing of who has strayed from His way, and He is most knowing of who is [rightly] guided."

E. Humanity towards Non-Muslims:

“لَا يَنْهَى اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ لَمْ يُقَاتِلُوكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ وَلَمْ يُخْرِجُوكُمْ مِنْ دِيَارِهِمْ أَنْ تَبَرُّوهُمْ وَتُقْسِطُوا إِلَيْهِمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُقْسِطِينَ”⁴

"Allah does not prohibit you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not eject you from your homes - from being righteous toward them and acting justly toward them. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly."

F. Promotion of Peace:

"وَإِنْ جَنَحُوا لِلسَّلَامِ فَاجْنَحْ لَهَا وَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ."⁵

"And if they incline to peace, then incline to it and rely upon Allah. Indeed, it is He who is the Hearing, the Knowing."

G. Education in Hadith (P.B.U.H):

It's essential to note that in Ah'ādith (saying of Prophet) highlight values such as sympathy, tolerance, justice, fairness and respect, which are important for promotion of peace. While there may not be clear references to media, the principles can be applied to any means of communication.

H. Kindness & Respect:

"عن أبي هريرة -رضي الله عنه قال قال النبي -صلى الله عليه وسلم- مَنْ لَا يَرْحَمَ لَا يَرْحَمُ."⁶

"Abu Huraira (may Allah be pleased with him) reports that the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said, "The one who does not show mercy will not be shown mercy."

I. Social Harmony:

عَنْ النُّعْمَانِ بْنِ بَشِيرٍ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ مَثَلُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ فِي تَوَادِهِمْ وَتَرَاحُمِهِمْ وَتَعَاطُفِهِمْ مَثَلُ الْجَسَدِ إِذَا اشْتَكَى مِنْهُ عُضْوٌ تَدَاعَى لَهُ سَائِرُ الْجَسَدِ بِالسَّهَرِ وَالْحُمَّى."⁷

"Nom'an Bin Bashir (may Allah be pleased with him) narrates that The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "The believers in their mutual kindness, compassion, and sympathy are just like one body. When one of the limbs suffers, the whole body responds to it with wakefulness and fever."

J. Justice:

"حَدَّثَنَا مُسَدَّدٌ حَدَّثَنَا مُعْتَمِرٌ عَنْ حُمَيْدٍ عَنْ أَنَسٍ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ أَنْصُرْ أَهْلَكَ ظَالِمًا أَوْ مَظْلُومًا قَالُوا يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ هَذَا نَنْصُرُهُ مَظْلُومًا فَكَيْفَ نَنْصُرُهُ ظَالِمًا قَالَ تَأْخُذُ فَوْقَ يَدَيْهِ."⁸

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: "Help your brother whether he is an oppressor or is oppressed. People asked, 'O Allah's Messenger! It is all right to help him if he is oppressed, but how should we help him if he is an oppressor?' The Prophet said, 'By preventing him from oppressing others.'"

K. Teachings in Bible for Religious Harmony:

In Bible, there are many teachings about peace, harmony and coherence, like the following verses.

1. "Pay attention to the words of the wise; apply your heart to my teaching. For it is good to keep these teachings in your heart and always ready on your sayings."⁹
2. "God blesses those who work for harmony, for they will be called the children of God."¹⁰
3. " The Bible advises that one should make every effort to maintain peace in society and live with peace. "¹¹
4. " It was written about the Holy Spirit that He makes our lives easier and teaches us love, joy, peace, goodness, truth, and gentleness..¹²
5. " The Bible advises everyone to live in harmony and says to be in harmony with each other in the church, not to disagree, and to be united..¹³

A. Instructions in Hinduism.

The teachings of Hinduism also highlight the values of understanding, harmony with other religions, respect for humanity, and unity. These teachings of Hinduism can also be presented as a theory of media and interfaith harmony.

1. "Let people of different beliefs come together and share in the common bond of kindness."¹⁴
2. "May diverse paths lead us to the common goal of peace and coexistence?"¹⁵
3. "The wise recognize the underlying unity in all religions, fostering harmony¹⁶."
4. " The teachings of Hinduism have declared harmony essential and said that in unity there is strength and improvement in society..¹⁷
5. "Communication is a bridge between different beliefs, promoting understanding and tolerance."¹⁸
6. "May the media be a instrument for increasing wisdom and understanding, fostering interfaith harmony?"¹⁹

iv. Impact of Media on Religious Harmony:

The media is seen as a key part for shaping public opinion and morals. In India & Pakistan, media plays a very risky role, which can positive or negative, like a double-edged sword. Some researchers argue that the media in India & Pakistan has contributed to sectarian violence by focusing on certain groups. Critics say that these media outlets lack objectivity and spread misinformation, including through religious programs.

In the past, we have seen that many people have also used some social media platforms to spread communal conflict. It was because of the news spread through social media that violent riots broke out in "Muzaffarnagar" in 2013-2014.²⁰ Psychologists suggest that rumors are especially risky because they can quickly spread and lead to violence, as seen in various incidents in South Asia's history²¹. Overall, we can say that the media plays a very important role, especially in matters of religion, and a little irresponsible reporting can have very dangerous consequences.

A. Interfaith harmony & Pakistan:

According to the Pakistan Media and Regulatory Authority, there are a total of 96 TV channels in Pakistan. Out of these, 37 are news and current affairs channels, with 14 of them broadcasting in local languages.²²

There are also 143 FM radio channels, 137 newspapers, 13 weekly newspapers, 2 fortnightly newspapers, and 45 monthly magazines. According to non-governmental statistics, there are 160 million TV viewers & 80 million FM radio listeners.

An analytical report supervised by 12 different institutions revealed that newspapers published the most news and images related to religious minorities, while radio largely ignored them²³. The research also found that newspapers published the most oppositional news about minorities.

In the news, the most talked-about topic concerning minority groups was blasphemy, which mostly affected the Christian community. However, TV and radio did not cover any news about blasphemy.

Another topic in the news about religious minorities was their heritage, especially their culture and ancient artifacts. Additionally, there were some news stories about seizures of properties owned by Hindu and Ahmadi communities, as well as coverage of religious minority festivals.

Adnan Rehmat, a researcher and journalist, mentioned that while there is more numerical prevalence of blasphemy cases against Muslims, minorities face a harsher stance. He also noted that when reporting on minorities is scarce, it tends to be based on assumptions, giving the impression that there is nothing more to Christian and Hindu communities than blasphemy.²⁴

Dr. Tauseef Ahmed, former head of the Department of Public Relations at the Federal Urdu University, highlighted that the issue of forced conversion of Hindus and Christians in Sindh and Punjab is not only a topic of debate in Urdu media, especially TV channels, but there is also an issue of preferential treatment based on constitution, legality, and

tradition. This is rarely discussed, as the constitution does not provide all citizens with equal rights, and those who demand it are not taken seriously²⁵.

B. Media's Role in Sectarian Incidents.

On January 4, 2011, Punjab Governor Salman Taseer was assassinated. This one incident alone is enough to understand the role of media in religious extremism that the killer was convinced by the media that Taseer was a rascal and it was his duty to kill him. While in reality, nothing could be proved regarding Governor Salman Taseer's insolence about the Holy Prophet. Also, in Islam, the duty of punishing and implementing it is the responsibility of the state alone.

The realization of the above false reality was the result of large sections of the media acting irresponsibly²⁶.

Nov 12 2005: A crowd of 3,000 people set to fire three churches and homes of two clergymen as well as demolished a nursing hostel, nuns' hostel, a convent school and four other houses in Sangla Hill district Nankana.

It is blamed that Yousaf Masih threw a burning matchstick in the Quran Mahal situated in the Sangla Hill stadium which resulted, some copies of the Holy Quran being burnt.

Ten hours after the incident, announcements were made from mosques asking people to gather in front of the Jamia Madni Masjid of the town. Similar announcement were also made on Saturday. People were asked to observe a complete strike and not to send children to schools. Responding to the call, a strong mob carrying hockey sticks, iron rods, and axes assembled at the appointed place. Observers said some youths also carried tins of kerosene oil.

Religious leaders made burning speeches and provoked the mob to set to fire each and every place of worship of the minority community. Obeying the orders, the strikers rushed to Presbyterian Church and set it to fire. All the furniture, fixture, articles, and religious books were consumed by the fire. The mob also burnt the residence of Pastor.

The enraged youth then went to the Church of Holy Spirit in the Mancher Colony and vandalized it as well as the residence of Father Semson Dilawar. They also caused severe damage to the Saint Anthony High School, destroying its furniture, record, laboratories and library. Some 650 girls receive education at the school, majority of them Muslim. Akram Gill, a Christian legislator, said the dispute was due to a gambling debt owed by two Muslims to a Christian²⁷.

In this incident we can see the power full role of local media, but now days the role of social media and main stream media have become stronger. In Islam, the duty of punishing and implementing it is the responsibility of the state alone.

v. Conclusion:

The research paper "Media's Role in Fostering Interfaith Harmony: A Study on its Dynamic Influence in Religious disputes" shows about how the media can help create interreligious harmony and create peace. The study shows how the media can be positive by helping different religious groups for understand each other and learning people about different religions to promote respect and peace. The research shows many ways for media professionals to help make peace between different religions. This includes reporting news in a fair and unbiased way, avoiding making stories more exciting than they are and telling stories that include everyone.

The study also shows how the media can sometimes make things worse, especially in developing countries like India and Pakistan, where media coverage can lead to violence between different religious groups and spread wrong news. It also shows that social media can play a big part in spreading falls news between different religious groups.

In conclusion, the research declares that while the media can be helpful in promoting peace between religions, it needs to be used carefully to avoid making things worse. By following the suggestions in the study and promoting values that all religions share, the media can help bring different religious groups together and create a more accepting and understanding society.

vi. Results:

This research shows that how the media affects religious controversies and can help to promote understanding between different religions. In today's connected world, the media has a big impact on how people see religions. This study tries to figure out how the media can help make religious debates more peaceful and recommends ways for the media to do this.

The study shows how main stream media and social media talk about different religions. It's important for the media to report fairly, without making things seem more dramatic than they are, and to include everyone's views. The study also looks at how different religions communicate about living together, showing that they share values like sympathy, friendship and respecting others.

This study also shows about the risks of how the media can cover religion, especially in places like India and Pakistan, where news can sometimes cause violence between religious groups. Social media can also spread false news that can lead to violent acts.

The incident of b'abri Mosque (India), Incident of Gujr'at India, Murder of Governor Salman T'āseer (Pakistan), incident of S'āngla Hill & Jar'ānwala (Pakistan), Two times mob violence in Sialkot, these all incidents shows that main stream media & social media plays a significant and strong role in the mind-making of the public. Media can help bring different religions together, but it has to be careful not to make things worse. By following certain rules and focusing on what religions have in common, the media can help build understanding between different faiths and create a more comprehensive society.

vii. Future Recommendations:

Here are some future recommendations based on this research article.

1. **Guidelines for Media Persons:** Media persons should follow guidelines for reporting on inter religious issues. They should report in unbiased and balanced way, avoiding scandal and promoting peace.
2. **Learning about Media:** Schools and communities should have programs to teach people about how the media can shape opinions, especially about religion. People should learn how to think critically about media content.
3. **Inter religious Dialogue:** Media platforms should encourage and support conversations between people of different religions. This can help people understand each other better.
4. **Training for Media persons:** Media professionals should receive training on how to report on religious issues sympathetically and responsibly. They should also learn about different cultures and religions.
5. **Checking and Evaluation:** There should be ways to check how the media reports on religious issues from Government institution. If there are biased or unfair reports, action should be taken to correct them.
6. **Relationship with Religious Leaders:** Media should work with religious leaders to make sure they represent religions correctly and respectfully in their reports.
7. **Promotion of Positive News:** Media should focus on positive news from different religions working together. This can help show that people from different religions can get along.

8. Social Media Regulation: There should be rules for social media to stop the spread of fake news about religions. People should use social media responsibly.
9. Research and Documentation: More research should be done on how the media can promote interfaith harmony. The findings should be shared with media workers and policymakers.
10. Community Engagement: Media should talk to communities affected by religious issues to understand their views. Media can help these communities speak out and have conversations.

These recommendations can be helpful for media workers, policymakers, and community workers to promote interfaith harmony and inclusivity.



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