[Aimen Siddiqui](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/aimen-siddiqui)

November 6, 2020

**The ‘soft’ use of hard narratives**

The writer is an assistant editor at The News

Last month, in an imaginary world conjured up by the Indian media, Karachi’s non-existent Gulshan-e-Bagh area became the centre of a civil war. The news was all over Twitter – retweeted by various verified accounts of credible Indian news channels. That day, though, Karachi did report a cylinder blast in one of the multi-storeyed buildings near the city’s Maskan Chowrangi. But that blast had no connection with the stories on Twitter.

It is not surprising that in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, when India is seeing the worst spike in active coronavirus cases, the Indian media decided to spend countless hours discussing a made-up situation. For India and Pakistan any unsettling news from the other side of the border is great to build the ‘at least we’re not them’ narrative. After the world went into a lockdown, Prime Minister Imran Khan would repeatedly highlight the suffering of migrant workers in India, who were left on their own after the Modi-led government announced a countrywide lockdown.

The migration of these workers from India’s urban cities back to their homes with scarce resources was a terrible humanitarian crisis. The comparisons, drawn here were not to evoke any sense of empathy but to tell them that we’re at least better than our rival. At present, India is witnessing perhaps the worst economic crisis – fuelled by the pandemic. The nation is angry and the government fears losing its popularity among hardcore supporters. Unrest in Pakistan, in this scenario, is a great distraction for the Indians.

The exploitation of an independent country’s political or economic tensions to further a narrative through the media is quite common. The Hong Kong protests, for example, gained huge recognition in America because these protests were against China. Also, when Venezuela was on the brink of an economic collapse, the American media actively portrayed the country’s economic conditions to make a case against socialism. It doesn’t, however, mean that the situation in the two countries was better or that their people weren’t actually out on the streets protesting against brutal laws and a badly managed economy. The US also provided extensive coverage to conflicts in Syria, but is completely silent over the war in Yemen or Israel’s attacks in Palestine.

That the media may use an incident for its own benefit is not something out of the ordinary. And this is why the Pakistan government shouldn’t pay much attention to what Indian news channels are reporting (an Indian newspaper once misunderstood a story run by a Pakistani satirical news website) or question the intentions of the country’s political leaders. This holds true for India’s news segments on Abhinandan – the Indian pilot who was captured by Pakistan in 2019 and released as a peace offering.

India’s 2019 air strike was the main reason for Modi’s strong support. Many of his voters chanted ‘ghus ghus ke maara’ ([We] entered [the enemy’s territory] and killed them) during Election Day when the BJP rose to power for its second term. The BJP that once enjoyed huge popularity in India fears losing its grip in the country. It makes it all the more important for the Modi government to make its citizens believe that India has fought hard against its enemy and will continue to do so.

The overly sensationalised way of reporting turns Indian news reporting and analysis into a scene out of a Bollywood movie. This treatment is not limited to Pakistan. India’s domestic issues are also met with unnecessary sensationalism.

The oft-used ‘ghus ghus ke maara’ dialogue is straight out of a Saif Ali Khan-starrer Bollywood movie Phantom – which made headlines in Pakistan as well right after its release in 2016. That this dialogue was repeated by Indian voters highlights the fact that India has been successful in building a narrative among its people through the media. This is where Pakistan needs to up its game and use what is called ‘soft power’ to get ahead of India.

Films and TV shows are mostly viewed as an apolitical source of entertainment. Over the years, however, especially ever since independent channels began appearing on our TV screens, filmmakers used shows and films to further political narratives. In a high-choice media environment, the people are often at risk of not listening to the news because of their leaning towards non-political content.

And this is why the seemingly non-political content is skilfully wrapped in political voices to keep the audience in the loop. This narrative, however, could be one-sided and factually incorrect as well. Indian films are often a reflection of the country’s current political mood. In the early 2000s, when the political mood between India and Pakistan was a lot different than what we see today, two of Shahrukh Khan’s films, ‘Veer Zara’ and ‘Main Hoon Na’, promoted friendship between the countries. Then, the governments of both countries wanted the people from either side to live in harmony and peace.

Similarly, when Akshay Kumar’s ‘Toilet: Ek Prem Katha’ was released in 2017, it was viewed by many as an extension of Modi’s Swachh Bharat campaign. The Anupam Kher-starrer ‘The Accidental Prime Minister’ was suspected to be a jibe at the Congress. But these big-screen movies are mainly for domestic consumption. They are strategically released near the elections as a supposed part of election campaigns – there is no evidence on whether political parties fund these films.

Indian filmmakers and content creators are now using digital platforms like Netflix and Amazon – that have greater reach. From disgruntled filmmakers who are fed up of India’s censor boards to creators who want to capitalise on the booming digital industry, India is making the most of these two platforms to send its political voice across the world.

Through its web series, India paints itself as a progressive country which has to take several unpopular decisions, especially in Kashmir, to protect its citizens. It tries to show that it has the best interest of Kashmir in its heart and that it is Pakistan which is creating unrest in the valley.

On Amazon, a Manoj Bajpai-starrer web series, ‘The Family Man’, uses the same formula. It revolves around a middle-class man who works at the National Investigation Agency. The premise of the movie is that a Kashmiri boy is responsible for terror attacks in India. Apparently, Pakistan is behind these attacks.

A series of events takes Bajpai to Kashmir where he is all set to catch the Kashmiri. [While there, he does comment on the fact that he sees more army officers in the valley than tourists]. One of the scenes shot in the series was at Lal Chowk – one of the most sensitive areas in Jammu & Kashmir. Only two hours were given to take the shot. The entire area was covered in darkness. It wasn’t a film set but an actual location in a city of millions of people under lockdown.

When the series was released (September 2019), Kashmir was already under a dangerous curfew with no internet or phone services. It was probably the first time that the international world questioned the country over its blatant disregard to human rights.

So far, Pakistan has created content that is meant for domestic audiences – who don’t need any convincing when it comes to Kashmir. But that content, too, lacks the actual voice of Kashmiris.

While it is important to keep an eye on how a neighbouring country is reporting on our internal affairs, it is also essential to have a look at the sophisticated approach that country has adopted to convince audiences of its narrative.

Email: aimen\_erum@hotmail.com

Twitter: manie\_sid