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POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN ODISHA: A STUDY OF ODIA TELEVISION NEWS CHANNELS

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Abstract:

Politics, political system and politicians always depend on media to reach out to the masses and gain a political score. While few channels work as the mouth piece of certain political parties, some of the media houses do not fall prey to the parties in power and their agenda. That leads to a tussle between the people in power and media houses and takes an ugly turn. Like any other part of the world, use of media for political score can be easily observed in Odisha, a state in the eastern part of India. The researcher in this study tries to assess how the news channels in the state are used by various political parties and the way of their content design for them. For this the researcher has done a questionnaire based survey of common television viewers and also adopted discussion method and discussed with Editors of different news channels, political leaders and spokes persons of different political parties of Odisha.

Introduction:

Political communication is an integral part of political system as well as media. Media in all its form accommodate politics and give space to politicians and their political activities. Television channels, digital platforms and newspapers always thrive to reach out to their viewers and readers through maximum coverage of politics, political leaders and various political parties at the local, national and global level in large. Odisha, the state in focus for this research is a coastal state with around 480 KMs coastline and is prone to various natural calamities. The frequency and magnitude of natural disasters have been a hindrance in the progress of the state and the state political machinery and added Philip to the political activities of the parties in opposition in the state.

Odisha had witnessed the biggest political turmoil after the super cyclone in 1999 that took thousands of lives. The Congress lost its power and is still struggling to come back even after two decades. Media played a vital role during those days to topple the party in power. On the other hand, the ruling Biju Janata Dal (BJD) led by Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik has tactically used media to let the world know how efficiently they have handled a series of such natural calamities and its aftermath. In last two decades the media in general and television in particular in the state of Odisha has undergone a significant change. Basically elections and political campaigning by different political parties are covered by television channels with a positive approach. During 2004 general elections, ETV Odia, the then only private satellite channel of the state aired a series of programmes on election. "Election Express" was the unique and first of its kind programme aired by the channel. ETV Odia and OTV were the two channels during the 2009 general election that designed and presented series of programmes on different activities of political parties. There is a sudden rise in the number of TV channels post 2009 and it led to maximum coverage of political programmes, contents and political activities. Viewers have observed that a new trend of producing contents in favour of political parties has been started by the television channels of the state over the years. People of the state believe that the TV channels of the state are focusing more on politics and political parties and less on public issues.

Objectives of the Study:

The researcher tried to understand the role of different news channels of Odisha in political communication. Along with this studied to know the use of TV News channels of Odisha by political parties for political score and traced the political patronage to different news channels of Odisha. One of the important objectives of this study is to understand the content planning and designing of different news channels of Odisha in accommodating the political content.

Research Methodology:

The researcher has undertaken a questionnaire based survey of TV viewers of Odisha. The sample size was 200. Inclusion of both open ended and close ended questions in the questionnaire helped in better analysis of data. The researcher has interviewed the Editors of different Odia television channels and veteran journalists to find out their strategies in handling political content. To find out the strategies of different political parties in utilizing media, the researcher has also discussed with the spokes persons of various political parties of Odisha.

Review of Literature:

India is the largest democracy of the world. Its political system depends on media for all sorts of political communication. Particularly media plays a vital role during the election season. Six months before the general elections of 2019, most of the news channels started their ground exercise for the political coverage and designed special programmes. Even these news channels redesigned their rate charts for advertisement revenue. These channels expect at least 30% hike in their advertisement revenue in the election seasons (Raushni B.).

There is a new trend going on in Indian television journalism. The reporting crew instead of covering the political rallies depend on the video footage provided by different political parties. All political rallies of Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi were produced by professional television production crews and the final video footage was shared with most of the TV news channels. Before 2014 and 2019 general election, both BJP and Congress hired professional firms to produce the live coverage of the rallies. As per the Economics Times report, editors or managers of most of the channels admit that, the political rallies are now covered in this manner. So far as cost of production and logistics is considered it is always a horrendous task for the channels to make multi-camera live coverage of such events. When this problem is solved by political parties by providing footage to channels, it definitely raises question about TV Journalism. In western countries, channels make pools and share footage to minimize the production cost. But in India, as all channels are in the rat race and in an open competition with each other, it seems next to impossible.

Before the 2009 general elections, PN Vasanti (2009) in her regular column mentioned that, political news coverage in television channels is decreasing. But she is confident that Indian media has and will play a crucial role in influencing the political game. The quality and quantity of news coverage on politics will definitely influence the election outcome.

The present scenario in Odisha:

Majority of the media houses in the country are either owned or controlled by politicians or people with political patronage. In South India, almost all political parties have their own channel. Politicians in north also have their own Hindi and English channels. Odisha is at par with other parts of the country as far as this trend is concerned. Most of the leading media houses of the state are being run by different political personalities. The Sambad, the largest circulated daily and its sister news channel Kanak News and Radio Choklate are owned by Soumya Ranjan Patnaik, an MLA of the ruling BJD (Biju Janata Dal). The numero uno television channel of the state, OTV is owned by the family of former MP Baijayanta Panda. The Dharitree, one of the prominent newspapers is owned by former BJD MP Tathagata Satapathy. The 24x7 news channel News World Odisha is managed by BJD MP Rabindra Jena. Similarly the Cuttack MP of BJD is the editor of the Prajatantra, one of the oldest newspapers of the state. Congress MP Ranjib Biswal owns the newspaper the Samay. The Kalinga TV belongs to the family of BJD MP Dr. Achyuta Samanta. Apart from this, majority of media houses in the state are operated with politically inclined editorial policy and hence work like the mouth-piece of the political party their owner belong to.

Odisha TV journalism has observed a new trend in the last couple of years. Channels are coming up with specially designed programmes for political parties or leaders. ETV News Odia was running two shows titled “Naveen Odisha” and “Pragatira Saathi Dharmendra”. While one programme was meant for the ruling BJD and the chief minister Naveen Patnaik, the other was aimed at Dharmendra Pradhan, BJP’s aspiring chief ministerial candidate of the state. All other channels were airing news capsules highlighting the achievements of the government before the state assembly elections and the General Election. In the recent past, the various news channels were invited by the state government and asked to produce content in favour of the government highlighting the Chief Minister and his pro-people stance. Contents were presented to the viewers in the form of news, but channels were paid from the public exchequer

under the head of advertisement tariff. Now-a-days even these channels produce the broadcast content on behalf of the political parties. In the initial days of television journalism in Odisha, any ordinary event like inauguration or foundation stone laying ceremony used to get hardly an air time of 15-20 seconds in the snippets segment. But at present almost all events of the Chief Minister and his colleagues get maximum air time in the form of live broadcast. It's acceptable barring a channel for any kind of coverage by any political party, but boycotting a particular channel by the government raises serious concern about the autocratic mind set of the government. A different trend has developed in last couple of years. The basic intent of media is to work as a watchdog of the society. But instead questioning the government machinery for their loop holes, the channels unnecessarily drag people from opposition parties those who question the government. Some veteran journalists say that, even journalists now days forget their ethics and behave as if the spokesperson of parties in power and this is not a good sign for democracy as well as media.

Viewers Feedback:

The researcher has taken a questionnaire based survey to assess the use of television channels as a platform for political communication and political scoring. The sample size was 200. There were close ended and open ended questions in the questionnaire. All the data generated from the survey are analysed below.

The samples were taken from all the 30 districts of Odisha. The Researcher has followed the random sampling method for selection of samples. Ganjam district has the highest number of Legislative Assembly constituencies and Khurda homes the state capital Bhubaneswar. So both of the districts were separately represented by 15 respondents each (Chart-1). The districts Balasore, Mayurbhanj, Sambalpur, Puri and Sundargarh are represented by 10 respondents each. Rest of the districts are represented by 5 numbers of respondents.

Gender of the respondent	No of respondents	Percentage
Female	82	41
Male	118	59
Total	200	100

The Table-1 describes the sample distribution on the basis of their gender. Out of the 200 respondents 82 are females and 118 are males.

(Table-2: Respondents on the basis of their age groups)

Educational Qualification	No of respondents	Percentage
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Matriculate	14	7
Intermediate/+2	14	7
Graduate	62	31
Post-Graduate	92	46
Doctorate	18	9
Total	200	100

(Table-3: Respondents on the basis of their educational qualification)

Out of the 200, (Table-3)7% respondents each are from matriculate and Intermediate/+2 background, 31% respondents are graduates and highest 46% are Post-Graduates. 9% respondents are doctorates.

Respondents opinion	No of respondents	Percentage
Yes	168	84
No	32	16
Total	200	100

(Table-4: Respondents receiving political message on television)

As per Table-4, 84% respondents receive political messages from different political parties on television whereas 16% respondents say that they do not receive any political message from any political parties on television.

Respondents opinion	No of respondents	Percentage
Yes	146	73
No	36	18
Can't say	18	9
Total	200	100

(Table-5: Respondents opinion about the live coverage of political events)

73% respondents feel that TV channels unnecessarily do live telecast of political events. 18% feel it is necessary to live telecast the political events (Table-5) whereas 9% of the respondents remained indifferent to this activity.

Respondents opinion	No of respondents	Percentage
Biju Janata Dal- BJD	152	76
Congress	12	6
Bharatiya Janata Party- BJP	30	15
Others	6	3
Total	200	100

(Table-6: Respondents opinion about TV channels giving importance to political parties)

The ruling BijuJanata Dal (BJD) is enjoying a smooth run in the state and is in power in since 2000. This is probably the reason of TV channels giving more importance to BJD. (Table-6) 76% respondents say TV channels give more importance to BJD. 15% say it is Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which gets importance from TV Channels of Odisha. 6% say, it is Congress party which

gets importance in the state TV channels whereas only 3% opined that, others get importance.

Respondents opinion	No of respondents	Percentage
Biju Janata Dal- BJD	161	80
Congress	8	4
Bharatiya Janata Party- BJP	29	15
Others	2	1
Total	200	100

(Table-7: Respondents opinion about the political parties giving more advertisement in Odia TV Channels)

The television screens of Odia TV channels are flooded with the advertisements of ruling Biju Janata Dal (BJD). (Table-7) 80% respondents opined that, it is BJD which gives maximum advertisement to Odia TV channels. 15% say, BJP gives maximum advertisement and 4% say it is Congress which gives more advertisement in TV channels. Only 1% supports others so far as television advertisement is concerned.

Respondents opinion	No of respondents	Percentage
Debate and Discussion	86	43
Interview of political leaders	24	12
Special Episodes	36	18
Political Features	26	13
Others	28	14
Total	200	100

(Table-8: Kind of political programme people love to watch on TV)

Table-8 represents the opinion of respondents on the political content and formats of television and the kind of political programme exactly they wish to watch the most. Maximum 43% of the respondents prefer to watch “Debate and Discussions” on political events on television. 18% love to watch “Special Episodes” on political topics. Similarly 13% like “Political Features” and 12% like “Interview of Political leaders”. The remaining 14% respondents like “other” formats than the above four.

Respondents opinion	No of respondents	Percentage
Yes	170	85
No	12	6
Can't say	18	9
Total	200	100

(Table-9: Respondents opinion about channels working as mouthpiece of political parties)

Do you think TV channels are working as mouth piece of different political parties? In response to this question, 85% say “Yes”, the channels are working as mouthpiece of the political parties. (Table-9) Only 6% say “No” that means as per them channels do not work as mouthpiece of political parties. Whereas 9% opined that, they “can’t say” about this.

Respondents opinion	No of respondents	Percentage
Yes	172	86
No	28	14
Total	200	100

(Table-10: Respondents opinion about political news and public issue balance on TV)

The TV channels of Odisha are so obsessed with political news coverage that they neglect public issues. It is reflected from the respondents' response to a question "Do you feel TV channels are giving more importance to political news than other public issues?" While 86% of the respondents say the channels give more importance to political news than reporting public grievances, 14% of them denied the act (Table-10).

Apart from the quantitative data, respondents have given descriptive answers as well to an open-ended question. The question was "What is your opinion about different TV News channels in regard to political news coverage? (Please give your response within 100 words). Majority of respondents have given their opinion and expressed their thoughts with the condition of anonymity. Some of the responses are presented here. "Most of the TV channels are biased towards the ruling party, telecast in favour of them and give less priority to the opposition", says one respondent. This is not a good sign for a healthy democracy as it's one of the prime responsibilities of media to highlight the loopholes of both the ruling party and the opposition and make them aware of their responsibilities. One of the response conveys that media should be independent, free from fear and favour in its activities, not only in slogans." Another respondent is of the opinion that the practice of giving more priority to political news than any social and developmental news should be checked and media should be kept free from all barriers and external influences being the fourth pillar of the society.

A respondent raises question on the ownership pattern of the TV channels of Odisha and says, "Most of the Odia news channels are owned by political leaders. So the concerned channel ultimately becomes the mouthpiece of that particular party. The owner tries to get closer of his/her political boss through the television channel. This will lead to the death of Journalism in Odisha." One respondent says that the news channels have become puppets. They are owned by business houses and controlled by political bosses. Journalists behave like mere clerks working in media offices. As per some respondents, political news takes lion's share of air time. Most of the stories are event based. Many a time channels give biased and derogatory view point on a particular party. Maintaining neutrality has taken a back seat. People deserves and expects pure news, not paid news.

The researcher has got a different opinion from one of the respondents. He says "Politics is good but media should not be the mouth piece of any political party. Otherwise one can't differentiate between an individual and an institution. Now in India, the media is far from playing its role properly. As most of the political parties have their own media houses, easily manage to suppress much important news. Media is losing its credibility day by day." One respondent has given a very good suggestion to TV channels related to political coverage and says that during elections, TV channels should telecast a special program involving the candidates to know why they stand for and let the common citizen get the opportunity to ask direct questions to their representatives about their previous performance and future political manifesto."

One of the senior broadcaster and veteran media professional as respondent opined that, “TV channels should be more objective in their coverage. They should be impartial and decent instead of hitting below the belt while interviewing in the studio or engaging in any discussion. Media persons wearing political party badges should be avoided at any cost. Media ethics has been sacrificed at the altar of expediency. Media ownership is the prime reason for such a distressing media scenario of Odisha. Someone should make them aware that there is life beyond politics.” Another respondent says, “TV channels should focus more on creating awareness among the common people and make more efforts to bring in transparency and accountability in governance. People should be aware of their responsibilities and rights and media should take a significant role in creating such awareness. Media should play the role of a watchdog and highlight if the public servants fail to provide the services to the public within the prescribed timeline.”

One of the responses highlights the importance of development communication. It reads “Political news carry less positive impact on the society. During election, more importance is given to all political news and coverage of developmental news takes a back seat.” A respondent stresses upon the development reporting and says, “The channels are covering news of their own interest. They should broadcast the basic political news with analysis. The news of general public should be given first preference. The basic need of society is health, education, drinking water, road communication. So the TV channels should give preference to the news related to these topics and try to figure out remedies to avail it in day to day life”. One responds in a one-liner and says, “4th pillar should be non-corrupt and free from political parties.”

Opinion of Political Parties:

The researcher had a discussion with spokespersons of leading political parties BJD, BJP and Congress in the state. Former TV journalist turned BJD spokesperson Ms. Sulochana Das says that, “Media is going to play a vital role in upcoming elections. As the Election moral code of conduct are yet to be in force, all political parties are using television and other media platforms for advertisement. Our party is competing with the party in power at centre.”

In a similar fashion the former popular TV news editor turned Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee spokesperson Mr. Satya Prakash Nayak says, “So far as using TV platform for political score is concerned, our party is far behind all other parties in the state. We are not advertising. But yes, we try to put our points on television in different debate shows.”

On the other side, Mr. Sajjan Sharma, the Chief Spokesperson of state BJP says, “There is no scope for our party to use television for party advertisement. Most of the channels are controlled by ruling party in the state. Even if we raise various issues and concerns, that do not get air time in the channels. The state government is using media to its maximum extent.”

The Editor’s take:

The researcher tried to reach out to the editors of most of the TV news channels of Odisha to assess their take on the issue. Not a single editor agreed to comment openly on the political affiliation and bias of their respective for a particular political party. Under conditions of anonymity one editor of a

channel says, “Our editorial policy is designed as per the wish of the management. We, the journalists working here have no editorial freedom and have to strictly adhere to the instructions of the senior management.” Another Editor of a channel says, “As a journalist, I know it is my top most priority to protect the interest of people. But it becomes very difficult to work as per your wish in a channel whose owner is a politician.” In a similar way replied another editor of a 24X7 News channel that, “Overnight our editorial policy got changed, as the owner of channel changed his party” At the same time he also said that, “the allegations of not focusing on public issues by channels is baseless. We are more concerned about people and focus on public issues in our content.” Mr. Sandeep Sahu, former Editor-in-Chief of an Odia news channel and associated with BBC for a quite long time said that, “In my 40 years of journalism career, I have never seen such a poor state of media. Most of the channels are deviated from the basic objectives of journalism. There is no solidarity among the journalists. They are divided on party lines. They even don’t hesitate to act as the spokesperson of a political party. This is not a good sign for the media and the country”. Senior Journalist Mr. Nilambar Rath the Managing Editor and CEO of Odia digital platform OdishaLive and former Editor of Odia News Channel ETV News Odia (News18) says that, “The sanctity of journalism has gone down. I have never had such experience of political interference in editorial decisions. The neutrality and objectivity of political reporting is deteriorated like anything. This is not at all a healthy symptom of democracy.”

Findings and Conclusion:

Political communication and using media for political scoring is an age old practice. Based on the present study and analysis it is found that, most of the television channels of Odisha do have political affiliations for some party or other. Political parties are using television to the maximum extent for gaining political score and mileage. Television is proven to be the best medium to disseminate political message and to be used for political advertising. Media also plays a significant role in setting the agenda of various political parties. Majority of the respondents (85%) feel that the news channels work as mouthpiece of the political parties. Lack of editorial freedom is one of the biggest concerns which are not at all healthy for a democracy. When public issues are constantly ignored for the sake of political news coverage, that obviously raises question on the credibility, authenticity and accountability of media. Even though the common people are the target of media and politics, their interest is always ignored in a media-politician nexus. As 86% respondents opined that the channels give more importance to political news, it clearly indicates that, the TV channels of Odisha are more obsessed with political news coverage and neglect public issues. That’s why the present media is heavily criticised by people as well as veteran journalists. Media should act as a connecting link between the government and public and help in strengthening democracy being the forth pillar of the state. Other than the political campaign during elections, the channels should not be used by any means to gain political mileage.

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