

Breaking of a Baba: 90 Hours of live coverage and baba gone down an opinion study on media coverage of Godman Sarathi issue by private Odia news Channels

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Abstract

Miracles, Magic and success by shortcuts have always fascinated Man. For the same reason since ages man has believed in black magic, Sorcery and many similar practices. Sometimes due to his own dogmatic attitude Man has misperceived such things as a part of religion, though the purpose and essence of religion is quite different. Religion as a part of our cultural system has always remained as a matter of faith among people. Starting from the origin of civilization, people have perceived religion as a part of their life and a tool to solve all their problems. In the restlessness of modern life modern Man has started running for success and many people have started believing on shortcuts to success. Of the various means modern man has started adopting for success, religion is one. People have started running with a misperception that religion can be a short-cut to achieve success. Thus in their run for success, people have started considering the Babas and Matas as the God sent people to help them to reach success. Most of the modern Babas and Matas for whom religion has turned to be a business are making fake promises and with a little magic or sorcery they are fooling people to exploit them.

In the era of information society^{xiv} the media has gone quite powerful and it is considered as the watchdog of society. So when the case of fake God man Sarathi was exposed by a regional media channel, it became a hot cake for the public as the God man Sarathi was very popular in different regions of the state and had very high profiled links. The exposure of God man Sarathi suddenly became a hot story for the media channels and media channels started using the issue to gain more and more TRP to satisfy their better business interests. They went for live coverage of the issue till the arrest of God man Sarathi. Large amount of airtime were consumed and people were made to stick to the channels for hours. Presentations at different stages were made dramatic. The study here is an attempt to understand the realities of people's opinion about the media coverage's relating to the study.

Key words: Religion, media, Baba, Channel, News.

Introduction

India is a country of multiple religions but a majority of its population is Hindu. Hinduism as a religion is quite old. According to Hindu religious belief there are 33crores of Gods and Goddesses in this religion. It is interesting to note that from where did these 33crores of God and Goddesses came and which are the religious texts to describe them? People in case of religion mostly do not use the rational way of thinking as In India many of the mythological stories explain the idea that God and religion are the unquestionable subjects. Religious stories also preach that belief and trust in religious matter brings people closer to God and asking questions in matters related to religion drives people away from God (*Bhabe Hari, Tarke bahu dur*). Hence Emile Durkheim's definition on context of religion is also applicable here because Durkheim says "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden -- beliefs and practices which

unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them". Though Durkheim has given the example of Church here but the above definition has relevance in context of Hinduism also.

Hinduism as a religion speaks about saints, *Rishis*, *Babas* and other religious preachers. Here religious stories show the example of appearance of God in form of beggars, saints, *Rishis* and *Babas*. The Hindu mythologies also speak about the concepts like leela and the birth of Gods and Goddesses as human beings in this world. As the people in Hinduism believe in these God's rebirth and leela kind of things and they do not have the picture of only one God in their mind they remain mostly in a confused state.

According to Marx "Religion is the opium of people" and in most of the cases people believe things relating to religion blindly and become easy victims of fake God man and woman who does business and frauds on the name of religion and God. These Fake *Babas* and *Matas* mostly try to pull the fatalistic crowd towards themselves by different means and use the concepts like maya-leela. The concept of maya-leela is deep rooted in

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Hinduism through its religious texts. Referring to Chandrabhanu Pattanayak we can say "*Maya-leela is fundamentally a performative-creative act of continuous playing where completely positivist distinction between true and false, real and unreal cannot be made.* The fake God Men/Women use this maya-leela to establish their divinity among people to play with the minds of people and during this process they try to solve small problems of their so called devotees and they start establishing their stand as Gods or Goddesses.

They play in a very tricky manner in the minds of people by counseling, Magic and Prabachan (Preaching) and then they start capturing the attention of the larger mass to expand their business. From the social point of view it can be said that these God men are the people who capture the minds of people when they are disturbed or are in trouble. They use magic and similar practices to create miracles to establish rapport. At a later stage they start playing with the minds of people in a very tricky manner to fetch their own interests.

The Sarathi controversy

The Sarathi controversy which consumed lots of air time for television channels is a story which started in the year 1992. The self-declared God Man Sarathi Baba was born in Ganjam district of Odisha. His name was Santosh Roul. In his childhood he was mostly staying in Kendrapada District as his father was working in state electricity department there. Completing his schooling there Santosh joined in the college but left the college as a dropout and vanished from kendrapada in the year 1985. In 1992, he reappeared at Kendrapada and established a small ashram at a place called Barimula closer to Kendrapada town the district head quarter for Kendrapada District. He named himself as Srimad Sarathi and began organizing Satsangs (Religious associations) and started preaching there. He also began performing miracles like producing vibhuti (The divine ash) by claps and dripping honey from his feet. With this he began attracting large crowds. He claimed to be an avatar of Krishna and asked his young female devotees to serve him as Gopis (The beloved women of lord Krishna according to Hindu religious book the Srimad Bhagabat). Further he went on grabbing the government land there and established his ashram and a temple there. The ashram was designed in a royal manner and within theits periphery he developed a sophisticated stage to deliver preaching to the people. The man was shrewd enough to establish a cement cow and magically milk it in his ashram premises. It is also claimed that he was using

young women to satisfy his urges by fooling them. As per the claims he and his adopted son Satyam had contacts with Politicians, hooligans, film personalities of Odia film industry and were engaged in multiple business investments and had property in many places of the state including the state capital Bhubaneswar. It is also claimed that he was involved in chit fund scam of Odisha. The man was fooling people in different ways and was trying to prove himself to be clean and divine. He was also appearing in a regional devotional channel called Parthana to deliver sermons and also was using social media for spreading his business empire.

On 4th August 2015, News7 a 6 month old regional TV channel broadcasted a report against him explaining that sarathi baba has spent three nights at hotel Golkonda of Hyderabad with a girl and to hide his identity that time he was not in traditional attire rather with jeans and T-shirt. Sarathi initially protested and tried to prove the news wrong but the news channel came up with evidence to broadcast the fact. Then people came on protest and the news was as rapid as wild fires. Other news channels also joined with it. The television channels went on telecasting the Baba Sarathi issue on a live coverage basis and some channels dedicated complete airtime to this issue only. During this issue police came ahead to protect the Baba and improper handling of the issue by the local Police Superintendent fuelled fights between police and public. The situations became violent and finally chief minister had to issue the transfer order of local police superintendent and crime branch inquiry into the issue. Finally after crime branch enquiry the baba was taken to custody.

The Media Scenario

In Odisha, the trend of 24x7 news channels is not very old rather the business of 24x7 business channels started within last few years and within these years none of the media channels have ever dared to take such bold steps to go for this type of investigative journalism. It was also very difficult to go against a powerful person like Sarathi who had a strong nexus with influential people. Prameya News 7 exposed this news first and then Zee Kalinga the Oriya news channel of zee Group joined to cover this issue. These two news channels from starting till the arrest of Baba Sarathi were covering the issue in a minute to minute manner. The coverage was mostly a live coverage including panel discussions. The media houses went on exposing one after another mistakes and wrong deeds of Godman Sarathi and went on presenting them in a very dramatic manner. The total show was like a drama filled

with Crime, suspense, thrill, action (Police and public fight), humor and sex. The comic shows were the tools to remove boredom and the live coverage was really a tool to make people stick to the channels. The 24x7 phone in facility for feedback was also becoming a tool to attract people towards the channel and was acting like a catalyst to pull people towards the channels. The dramatic ways of presentations, repetition of zoom in and zoom outs were also another technique to present the total issue in a very spicy and flavored manner. Repetition of sensitive visuals and variations in audio types and breaking news were well designed technical tools to attract the attention of public. The media presentations were including mostly 2-3panel discussions every day and the anchoring in these panels were quite aggressive. Channels were trying to expose political links of sarathi and political leaders were also getting involved in the panel discussions. The other channels which were not covering this issue in a fashionable manner were getting pushed back to the back row and the channels which were presenting the story in dramatic manner were becoming the centre of attraction and were gaining a big TRP figure in comparison to others.

TRP of Different News Channels during the issue

Table-1

S. No.	Name of the Television Channel	TRP
1.	Prameya News7	150
2.	Zee Kalinga	134
3.	ETV News	26
4.	Focus News	52
5.	Kanak TV	85
6.	OTV	174
7.	Naxatra News	5
8.	MBC	131
9.	Kalinga TV	34

Weekly TRP status of different Odia news channels during Sarathi Baba Issue

Source: Confidential

During this time all the other issues were pushed back or became mere scrollings on the news channels and the God Man Sarathi issue captured complete attention. The media presentations became more of an infotainment type to capture public attention a big amount of air time (90 Hrs) were consumed for the issue. Thus there is a need to understand the opinion of people relating to the coverage of this issue because understanding people's opinion relating to the coverage of such a big issue will help people of press to take

necessary precautions in future while covering other big issues and it will help people to understand the nature of coverages in a better manner in future.

Objective of the Study:

To study and understand the opinions of people relating to the coverage of Godman Sarathi issue by private odia news channels during the exposure of Godman sarathi baba till his arrest.

Methodology

The study is conducted among 100 people selected by accidental sampling in odisha's capital city Bhubaneswar and Questionnaire method is used for the purpose of the study. The reason to select Bhubaneswar as the area of study is, Bhubaneswar is the capital city of the state and people here have maximum media exposure and most of the media houses are concentrated here. Data used in the study are both primary and secondary and variables associated with the study are individual's exposure to media and time frame of the study.

Findings:

The findings of the study are as follows:

Viewing Habit

Talking about the news viewing habit it can be said that people watch the Odia news channels and they have watched the sarathi baba controversy in Odia news channels but have agreed that quality of the coverage of the issue is of average type and most of them have spent nearly 0-20 hours to watch the issue.

Presentation style

People have appreciated the live coverage of the issue and have told that it was mostly information with entertainment type however regarding the language style of presentation, people have not spoken anything very clearly and have expressed that the presentations by different news channels were not properly balanced.

Policy issues

Regarding policy issues people have not accepted the media houses way of covering only sarathi Baba issue pushing all other issues to the back bench but they have appreciated the media trial of sarathi baba before real trial and the way media aroused excitement among people on the day of Sarathi Baba's arrest.

Ethical Aspects

Discussing on the ethical aspects of the coverage it can be said that people have appreciated the

media's attempt to show wrong deeds of police and media's analysis of sarathi Baba's non verbal behavior in front of the camera. Though they have agreed to expose the identity of the girl but they have also agreed that there was a need for more sympathetic approach towards the girl during the coverage and most of them have agreed that truth should be expressed and if needed violent visuals can be shown for it.

Business, Publicity and credibility

Talking about business policy, publicity and credibility related issues associated with media in relation to the issue it can be said that people have mostly supported media on this regard and have finally agreed that the steps taken by media are not completely wrong but at certain cases improvements and modifications are a better choice.

Conclusion:

From the above study it can be concluded that television as a cold media^{xv} has given ample scope of participation to public and has made people to stay actively associated with the coverage of the issue but at the same time due to the cultural back grounds of the audience and presentation styles of the issue at certain points it has also behaved like a hot medium. For example it has behaved like a hot medium during police VS public fight to due to continuous display of violent visuals. According to people in the total coverage media has done a job which is mostly praise worthy but at certain points the scopes for modification and improvement are ignored and media has not performed in a very

excellent manner. it's performance is of average standard and in future if such aspects are taken into consideration, there will be a better quality of news coverage will be seen in Private odia news Channels.

1. *An information society is a society where the creations, distribution, use, integration and manipulation of information is a significant economic, political, and cultural activity. Its main driver are digital information and communication technologies, which have resulted in an information explosion and are profoundly changing all aspects of social organization, including the economy, education, health, warfare, government and democracy*
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