

## National Seminar

### **Media and Minorities: Text, Context and Discourse**

October 13-14, 2015, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

Interrogating the relationship between the media and ‘minorities’, is a project fraught with complexities and one that must avoid pitfalls of commonsensical analyses. Contemporary discussions on press and its coverage of minorities have mostly addressed the minorities and their issues from the optics of religious, caste and linguistic identities. However, scant attention has been paid to the question of who are these minorities and how do discourses around them get formulated and settled? And by whom? Many of these questions cannot be answered by the familiar lapsing into the ‘majority-minority’ bipolarity, with its clear categorization that lends itself effortlessly to stereotypical media portrayals, more glaringly, in a visual culture that is neither critical nor powerful enough to transcend these divides. In fact, many of the inequities in our society that place minorities in a socially, economically and culturally vulnerable, even discriminatory position, are often maintained by the media. How do media construct this *otherness*, in visible and invisible ways? How do these media portrayals of India’s myriad minorities contribute to their marginalization?

From the time when the Constituent Assembly debates informed the issue of ‘minority rights’ in a postcolonial setting, to the careful embedding of the principles and institutional frameworks of secularism in the Nehruvian era that nurtured the idea of an inclusive nation-state (which was unambiguous in its emphasis on equal treatment of all citizens irrespective of religion, caste and creed) to the brazen erosion of both secularism and modernity with the rise of the Hindu right in the mid-1980s—much of these changes were mirrored not just in politics but more importantly in today’s mediated world, in the representation of and the framing of the discourse around the ‘minority question’. A plethora of events in recent past, most acutely after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 to the recent killing of Mohammed Akhlaq by a lynch mob on the suspicion that he killed a calf and kept the meat in his refrigerator make clear that *the place and position of minorities in India remains fragile*. Alternately, the killing of a young student from the North East, Nido Tania, a couple of years ago in the heart of the capital and the attacks on Christian community, all underscore the point that the anxieties of India’s minorities, of different affiliations, still remain unresolved more than six decades after Independence. So while some of these examples cited above have to do with security concerns of minorities, reports such as those by the Sachar Committee point to their socio-economic and educational backwardness. Yet, such flagrant social exclusion and structural marginalization of the minorities often finds few takers in the media whose occupational culture and production routines privilege powerful and dominant ‘voices’. In the past, news coverage of ‘events’ that fall in the majority-minority labyrinth have fallen short of qualifying in the objectivity and neutrality tradition of

journalism. The minorities in wielding neither political nor economic power remain an unattractive constituency for the media. The crisis of representation by an unrepresentative press, both in its failure to present a 'multi-perspectival' view of events and its unsympathetic view of the minorities in part, due to lack of workplace diversity, arising especially in editorial and reporting departments have made the media opaque to the need of these minorities to tell their stories. How do minorities respond to these structures of domination that have influenced the production and reception of the mainstream news text about their issues?

Needless to say, plural and diverse democracies like India need a responsive media that is able to provide the citizens with a range of views to understand complex political issues of the day so that they become forums of democratic debate. As an institution that informs public knowledge formation, the responsibility of the media to the country's minorities and dispossessed is far greater than is often understood. From cultural politics of representation to the possible democratization of the news spaces in the age of Web 2.0, with digital media changing the dynamics of how mainstream press conventionally sourced, editorialized and presented news, the seminar hopes to rethink the relationship between media and minorities vis-à-vis the polity, political process and policymaking.

The themes being discussed in this rubric include but not limited to:

- Media and Minorities: Theory and Practice
- Press and Minorities: Text and Discourses
- Muslims and the Indian Press: Issues, Politics and Challenges
- Media and Representation: Voice, Visibility and Access
- Press and the North East: Imaginaries of Exclusion and Inclusion
- Rethinking Media and Exclusion: Is a peace paradigm possible?