Minorities in Indian Urdu News: Ahmadis, Journalistic Practices and Mediated Muslim Identity

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Abstract

A case study of a protest campaign against the Ahmadiyya community in Punjab and its coverage in Urdu language news media of India, this paper locates its narrative at the intersection of media, politics and religion. It seeks to advance the field theory project beyond western media systems by applying it to Indian Urdu news. It demonstrates that the religious field is a neighbouring field of Urdu news and the former wields powerful influence over the latter. Moreover, the religious field with the help of news media uses politics to have its voice heard.

The paper specifically reads into the manner in which Urdu dailies covered Majlis Ahrar-e Islam Hind's (a Muslim interest group) protest campaign to cancel Pranab Mukherjee's (then Finance Minister of India) visit to Qadian, Punjab in 2009. He was set to participate in an annual function of the Ahmadis who are a persecuted minority group among Muslims. The protest campaign, with an active support of Urdu dailies, got transformed into a media campaign against the Ahmadis and was successful in getting the Minister's visit cancelled.

The paper investigates the dynamics of collaboration between Urdu news and the ulama that made possible transformation of anti-Ahmadi campaign into a media campaign. It attempts to elucidate the uncritical support that Majlis Ahrar-e Islam Hind received from Urdu dailies. For this purpose, it delves into normative structure of Urdu news field and its journalistic practices. It draws attention to their implications for Indian Muslim identity.

Introduction

In 2009, Pranab Mukherjee (then Finance Minister of India) agreed to attend the annual convention *jalsa salana* of the Ahmadis on 27 December (IANS 2009). *Jalsa salana* occupies an important place in the calendar of the Ahmadis (members of the Ahmadiyya community) and was scheduled to be held from 26-28 December in Qadian in the Indian state of Punjab. After learning about Mukherjee's visit, Majlis Ahrar-e-Islam Hind (MAIH) which is an *ulama* (Muslim clerics)-led Muslim interest group, launched a campaign in Punjab against it. Urdu-language newspapers, especially the three that are studied here, transformed it into a media campaign against the Ahmadis, and thus helped MAIH get Mukherjee's visit cancelled.

According to Census of India 2001, Muslims constitute the largest religious minority group (13.4 per cent of the total population) of India. Urdu news which is overwhelmingly produced and consumed by Muslims in India, has a self-image of being the champion of rights of this minority community. It is always replete with stories about marginalization of Muslims in almost every walk of life and opinion pieces that critique Hindu majoritarianism as chiefly responsible for the same. The partisan coverage that the community receives in non-Urdu news has been one of concerns of Urdu news.

Ironically, *ulama*-led interest groups and Urdu news do not recognize Ahmadis's rights to fair media. The latter are a marginal and persecuted group amongst Muslims of South Asia (Smith 1943, Valentine 2008, Khan 2015). In other words, the Ahmadis, who form a minority group within a larger minority group i.e., Muslims, do not get fair representation in Urdu news that considers itself a champion of minority rights. It is this paradox that the paper attempts to capture through a case study of the unrealized visit of Mukherjee to Qadian. To unravel this paradox, the paper will try to understand the following: How does success of an interest group's media strategy reflect on the relationship between normative structure and journalistic practices of Urdu news field?

The paper seeks to advance the field theory project beyond western media systems by applying it to Urdu news media of India. It draws on Bourdieusian concepts like social fields, habitus and capital and Oscar Gandy's concept of information subsidies to investigate the MAIH's use of Urdu news to influence the leadership of Indian National Congress Party to prevent its minister Mukherjee from participating in *jalsa*. With a focus on inter-field relations, it tries to understand facets of successful collaboration between MAIH and Urdu news and its (collaboration's) implications for Urdu journalistic practices and Muslim identity.

Field theory and news media

Bourdieu understands the social world as divided into various fields that are semi-autonomous and increasingly specialised spheres of struggle, and in these fields "individuals and organizations compete, unconsciously and consciously, to valorize those forms of capital which they possess" (Benson 2006: 190). The media field, like other social fields, is constituted through the struggle between the autonomous pole (represented by the cultural capital) and heteronomous pole (represented by the economic capital) (Benson & Neveu 2005: 4-6). The former represents specific capital unique to the media field while the latter forces which are external to the field. The media field is a part of the field of power, and within the latter, it falls within the dominated field of cultural production. The fields of restricted cultural production, on the one hand, and large-scale production, on the other, flanks it. Hence, it is characterised by high degree of heteronomy and low degree of autonomy. In other words, the media field is a "very weakly autonomous field" (Bourdieu 2005: 33).

The inter-field relationships in the context of media field turn out to be the same between the latter and the field that it covers. Marchetti (2005: 76-79) proposes four variables to analyse relationships among different social fields: interdependence of a field's economy with that of the field of activity being covered; degree of control the field has on its own coverage; the degree to which the media field imposes its own logic and internal hierarchies upon the field it is covering; and the social characteristics of social actors. The religious field, as this paper will demonstrate, appears to exercise a good measure of control over its coverage by Urdu news while the latter emerges as the collaborator with actors of the religious field.

It is through these inter-field relationships that all social fields are subject to external pressures or shocks and the media field tends to be more prone to them because of its very weak autonomy. Any of these shocks can alter the existing relationship between the autonomous and the heteronomous poles that is the source of inertia, the status quo, and bring about changes in the field. For example, in the case of the relationship between journalists and their sources of information, it is important to think of it as "meetings between different habitus and different positions in the field" (Marchetti 2005: 76). If sources are located in the neighbouring field, external pressures can present themselves as pressures from the sources and the same can influence the journalists' decisions about the information shared by the former.

Like the concept of capital and its various forms, the notion of habitus is integral for a complete analysis of inter-field relations. Benson (2014: 27) draws on Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 115-140) to define habitus as "an individual's habitual way of being—encompassing ideological dispositions, judgments of taste,

and physical bearing—shaped by family, education and profession". Marchetti (2005:78) also reminds us to take into account "the educational and social trajectories", i.e. habitus, in addition to "the professional trajectories" for a comprehensive understanding of inter-field dynamics with reference to the production of news. Nature of relationship between the habitus of journalists and their sources is a key factor that shapes the relations between the media field and the field it covers. They can have similar or different habitus and their social background, professional education and professional trajectories can provide an explanation for the difference or similarity. Benson uses concepts of 'habitus affinities' and 'habitus gap'/habitus disaffinities' to describe similarities and differences respectively in the habitus of social actors. It follows from this line of reasoning that "those with similar habitus are likely to share a confluence of interests and tastes" (Benson 2014:27). To him, these concepts not only capture the relationship between the habitus of individual journalists and their sources but also "express a structural relation" (Benson 2014: 127) of various fields.

With these analytical insights about workings of habitus in defining inter-field relations in mind, Benson mobilizes these concepts ('habitus affinities' and 'habitus gap'/'habitus disaffinities') to capture the role of habitus in disguising the influence of the domain of international NGOs on news field. He demonstrates that due to 'habitus affinities', immigration beat journalists are predisposed to uncritically accept the frames advocated by the leadership of international NGOs working on the immigration issues in the United States because both these groups of professionals got their education in prestigious universities/institutes of the US. Conversely, "a significant 'habitus gap' between elite journalists and immigration restrictionist groups ….. contributes to more negative, denigrating coverage of restrictionist groups…. and lesser media visibility of these groups" (Benson 2014: 127) than for humanitarian (pro-immigration) activist groups.

This study suggests that religious field was successful in distorting the professional practices of journalism in the independently owned Urdu press. The influences of the neighbouring fields on the journalistic practices in the form of distortions of the established norms within news production have far-reaching implications. The media field occupies central position within the larger field of power and is closely entwined with other social fields. Hence, the media field plays the role of "crucial mediator" amongst all the fields. In the context of this paper, Urdu news emerges as a mediator between the religious and political fields.

Urdu news in India: The field and its normative structure

Vernacular languages newspapers have often been looked upon as "problematic" unlike English-language press of India that is generally regarded as a model by the media watchdogs like Press Council of India (Ståhlberg 2013: 22). The Hindi press (the largest vernacular press) is criticised for biased reporting, inciting violent conflicts between religious groups and paying low salaries to journalists (Ståhlberg 2002: 217-218). One of the reasons for this is that it has been overwhelmingly supportive of the politics of power and culture of Hindu nationalist groups (Engineer 1991, Rajagopal 2001) and critical of state-initiated affirmative action programmes for lower caste population.

In the 1980s, rapid changes took place in Indian language print news media that contributed to the growth of vernacular press in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Robin Jeffrey (2000) describes this blooming of vernacular press as India's *newspaper revolution* and identifies five factors that contributed to the making of this revolution : (i) improved technology in producing and distributing newspapers; (ii) higher literacy rates; (iii) better purchasing power among the people; (iv) adoption of market-oriented outlook by publishers and (v) political awareness has spread to a large section of the population who are eager to know more (Jeffrey 1993: 2004).

Several changes that this newspaper revolution has brought about in the Urdu press, albeit with a delay of almost a decade, are illustrated well in the success of two multi-city edition dailies, namely *Roznama Rashtriya Sahara* (RS) and *Inquilab* (see for the former's case study, Amanullah 2009). Although anthropologists (Stahlberg 2013, Rao 2011) have closely observed the changes in other vernacular language press, there is a dearth of scientific work on Indian Urdu news. This lack of scholarly literature has contributed to a sort of ambivalence regarding its politics of power and culture as well as its journalistic practices.

Majority of Urdu reading public are either *Ajlaf* Muslims whose ancestors converted to Islam centuries ago from *shudras* (the lowest order in the caste hierarchy engaged in occupations like weaving, carpentry, etc.) or *Arzal* Muslims whose ancestors converted from outcastes' groups (scavengers, tanners, etc.). The Indian government recognizes both groups as suffering from social disabilities (GoI 2006: 192-193). Together these two groups are known as *Pasmanda* Muslims and the social movement that strives for their political and social empowerment as *Pasmanda Movement* (Ansari 2012). It is these *Pasmanda* Muslims (artisans and small entrepreneurs) who form majority among Urdu reading public. As a result of the deepening of democracy in India, they are now "part of a lower middle-class keen on consumption" (Jeffrey 1997c: 635).

An audit of successful Urdu newspapers reveal that the Urdu media field used to historically comprise of both Hindu and Muslim-owned Urdu newspa-

pers, each with completely different politics of culture. For example, *Hind Samachar*, a non-Muslim owned Urdu daily, has been carrying advertisements and press releases of the Ahmadis while the Muslim-owned Urdu newspapers have been doing the opposite (for a profile of *Hind Samachar*, see Jeffrey 1997c). The *Punjabi sharnarthis* (Punjabi-speaking Hindu and Sikh migrants from Pakistan) formed the majority amongst the readers of *Hind Samachar*. In North India, the *Punjabi sharnarthis* used to form a significant group of Urdu reading public till the 1990s. Towards the end of the twentieth century, the Hindu-owned Urdu newspapers shrank mainly because of the continuous disowning of Urdu language by non-Muslims as one of their professional languages in favour of English and Hindi (Orsini 1999: 410). On the contrary, Muslim-owned newspapers continued to cater to and shape the need of Urdu reading public. Consequently, Urdu press by and large became synonymous with Muslim press and Urdu reading public gradually got transformed into Muslim reading public.

Majority of Indian Muslims are Sunnites who follow the Hanafite School of Islamic jurisprudence. Also, most madrasas (Islamic seminaries) inculcate Sunnite-Hanafite Islam in their graduates who constitute a significant section of the Urdu reading public and Urdu journalists. Hence, to consolidate their audience-base, "publishers in Urdu produce magazines and newspapers geared overwhelmingly to Muslim interests" (Jeffrey 1997c: 635). Consequently, the dominant religio-cultural ideology of Urdu media is heavily influenced by the Sunnite-Hanafite interpretation of Islam. Studies have shown that the Urdu news media reflects and reproduces this dominant ideology of Muslim society, and it privileges religious elements (Verschooten, Amanullah & Nijs 2016) over secular ones (Amanullah 2011) of identity of Indian Muslims. This paper will focus on the *types* of religious elements of their identity emphasised upon in the Urdu news media.

Interestingly, advent of digital news production changed Urdu media outlets into profitable ventures in the concluding years of twentieth century and the opening decade of twenty-first century. With an eye on this positive change, a few Hindu-owned corporate media houses entered Urdu media market, either by bringing out a new newspaper like *Roznama Rashtriya Sahara* (RS) by Sahara India Mass Communication or by acquiring an already successful daily like *Inquilab* of Midday Infomedia Limited by Jagran Prakashan Limited. Electronic media outlets like *ETV Urdu* and *Zee Salam* are also successful ventures of the Hindu-owned media houses.

In a significant departure from the past, twenty-first century Urdu media outlets of Hindu-owned big business houses have preferred a policy of cultural politics similar to Muslim-owned Urdu newspapers. It appears to be a business strategy to cater to the changed religious profile of Urdu reading public. However, *Hind Samachar*, being an old newspaper, continued with the old policy of cultural

politics of Hindu-owned Urdu newspapers, and the same explains why MAIH activists burnt its copies (details will follow later). Its non-coverage of the protests against Mukherjee's visit runs contrary to the dominant cultural politics of Urdu news and hence was considered provocative. In this sense, though Urdu news' wait for "its Northcliffe, Murdoch or Citizen Kane" seems to have come to an end as Robin Jeffrey (1997c: 635) had predicted, their capitalism in Urdu media field does not seem to be "accompanying non-religious tendencies".

The Ahmadiyya community

The Ahmadiyya Muslim community is an Islamic religious community founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908) (MGA) on 23 March 1889 in British India. He claimed that he was the *Mujaddid* (divine reformer) of the fourteenth century *Hijrah*, the promised Messiah and *Mahdi* awaited by Muslims (Khan 2015: 42). Currently, the community is estimated to number more than 10 million spread over 206 countries. The members of the community are referred to as Ahmadi Muslims or simply Ahmadis or *Qadianis* after the name of Qadian, a small town in Gurdaspur district of the Indian side of Punjab where MGA was born (Khan 2015: 23-24). The community is divided into two groups: the Qadiani group and the Lahori group. They differ in their interpretation of prophecy:

> … the Qadiani Ahmadi teach that although Muhammad was the greatest of the prophets, prophecy did not end with him. This is one of several important points on which the Qadiani Ahmadi disagree with the beliefs of the Lahori group. The Lahori group accept Muhammad as the last and the greatest of the Prophets, arguing that no prophet can come after him. They regard Mirza Ghulam Ahmad as Mujaddid [reformer] and a prophet in a metaphysical sense only. (Valentine 2008: 128)

Muslims generally regard the Qadiani Ahmadi teaching on the finality of the prophethood as heretic and it is because of this belief that Qadiani Ahmadis have been facing persecution (Valentine 2008: 227-40). However, the Indian state considers Ahmadis as Muslims. They are free to practice their religion and call themselves Muslims in India.

In addition to the Islamic festivals, Ahmadi Muslims also observe several functions that are regarded as important for the community but are not equally obligatory. The most important among these is *Jalsa Salana*. MGA initiated it as the formal annual gathering of the community for increasing one's religious knowledge and promotion of harmony, friendship and solidarity within its members.

The Ahrar movement

Pranab Mukherjee (then Finance Minister of India) had to cancel his plan to attend *jalsa salana* of the Ahmadis on 27 December 2009 in Qadian. MAIH, the *ulama*-led interest group that was instrumental in forcing him to drop his plan, was formed in Ludhiana after independence. Its parent body Majlis Ahrar-e-Islam (MAI), also known as the Ahrar Party, was established in India in 1929 to inculcate the spirit of freedom among the Muslims. "Most of the Ahrar leadership was steeped in the Deobandi tradition of Islamic learning" (Qasmi 2014: 52). Similar to another *ulama*-led political party Jamiat Ulama-e Hind (JUH), MAI also championed the cause of complete freedom for India from the British rule. It always sided with the Indian National Congress throughout the struggle against the British colonial rule over India despite being an independent political body. MAI was bitterly opposed to the Muslim League and the partition of British India.

Being a cadre-based political organisation, MAI had "strong grass-roots connections for popular mobilization against the British rule" (Qasmi 2014: 53) which it used for political agitation against many social groups including the Ahmadis. It viewed them "as a British implant to divide the strength of Muslims and to bring about changes in sharia'at through the intermediary strength of a new prophet" (Qasmi 2014: 53) because they refuted the very idea of *Khatam-e Nabuwat* (finality of Mohammad's prophethood). Thus, it was at the forefront of agitations against the Ahmadis in the British period as well (see for details, Kamran 2013; Qasmi 2014). Maulana Habib-ur-Rehman Sani Ludhianvi (HRSL), the current President of MAIH, is the descendent of one of its founders Maulana Habib-ur-Rahman Ludhianvi.

The Ahmadis as news

Reports about Ahmadis with reference to its social interface with the Muslim community are recurrently covered in Urdu newspapers. Nature of Ahmadis' portrayal in these reports is generally negative. The first category of such reports focuses on the events organised by the *ulama* to caution Muslim masses about Ahmadis' proselytising activities. The second category of reports is about the protests that the *ulama*-led interest groups organise to counter these proselytising efforts. For example, it was reported in September 2011 that an Ahmadis-organised exhibition on the art of calligraphy in Pragati Maidan of New Delhi was forced to discontinue (Tankha 2011). An umpteen number of such examples are present in the history of India.

The newspaper reports that this paper will study fall under the second category. These reports appeared in December 2009 in Urdu newspapers and were about MAIH activists' protest against Mukherjee's visit to Qadian. It was selected as a

case study because this protest illustrates triangular interrelations of the Ahmadiyya community, the Muslim community and the Indian state. The involvement of the Indian state (represented by a cabinet minister) has never been as direct and clear as it was in this episode.

The sample for this case study includes three Urdu dailies: *Hamara Samaj* (HS), *Hindustan Express* (HE) and *Sahafat*. According to the classificatory scheme of the Registrar of Newspapers for India (RNI), they fall under the category of medium-size dailies (circulation between 25001 and 75000). Though they are published from more than one city, the sample has been collected from their Delhi edition. In 2009, they were among the top five Urdu newspapers of Delhi (see Table 1).

Sr. No	Title	Place of Publication	Claimed Circulation	Category
1.	Hind Samachar	Jalandhar	15523	Small
2.	Hindustan Express	Delhi	58133	Medium
3.	Hamara Samaj	Delhi	71700	Medium
4.	Sahafat	Delhi	56526	Medium
5.	Roznama Rashtriya Sahara	Delhi	59450	Medium
6.	Inquilab	Mumbai	32241	Medium
7.	Siasat	Hyderabad	41967	Medium
8.	Akhbar E Mashriq	Kolkata	65589	Medium

Table 1: Circulation of Prominent Urdu dailies in 2009. Source: Press in India 2009-10

In the month of December 2009, HS, HE and *Sahafat* carried respectively 6, 9 and 8 reports related to the Ahmadis. Out of them 2, 5 and 5 reports, respectively, were about Mukherjee's visit and MAIH's protests against it. The analysis here is based only on news reports.

The next section will describe the sequence of events triggered by the announcement and later cancellation of Mukherjee's visit.

The visit that never was

In 2009, the Ahmadis planned to organise *jalsa salana* in Qadian from 26-28 of December and invited Pranab Mukherjee to attend some of its proceedings on the 27 December and visit "various holy places associated with the founder of the Ahmadiyya sect" (IANS 2009). When MAIH learnt about Mukherjee's visit, it launched a campaign in the state of Punjab against it. Urdu newspapers, especially the three that are being studied here, gave the campaign a favourable coverage and helped MAIH get Mukherjee's visit cancelled. A study of reports that focussed on Mukherjee's visit provides the following sequence of events:

26 December 2009

Although the Urdu press reported the ulama and Muslim organisations' convening of various meetings with the aim of preventing Muslim masses from converting to the Ahmadism and participating in *jals*a, it was only on 26 December that all three newspapers reported Mukherjee's likely attendance at *jalsa* and the beginning of protests against his visit all over Punjab. Responding to the appeal of MAIH President, Muslims of the state had taken to the street to protest against the alleged religious conversion of poor Muslims to Ahmadism at the upcoming *jalsa*. The protestors burnt the effigies of MGA and Mukherjee. Keeping in view the number of protesters and their anger, the police had to deploy a large number of its personnel to maintain law and order. According to MAIH's estimate, almost 18 out of 22 districts of Punjab witnessed protest demonstrations.

Ludhiana witnessed the biggest demonstration where around 20,000 Muslims jammed the biggest square of the city. Protests occurred at ten different places of the city and they also brought out *janaza* (funeral procession) of Ahmadism.

27 December 2009

In their follow-up reports, HS and *Sahafat* informed that protests continued in Amritsar and Faridkot on the second day (26 December) as well. Office-bearers of the central mosque of Ludhiana under the leadership of the General Secretary of MAIH Mohammad Usman Rahmani Ludhianavi submitted to the Deputy Commissioner of the city Kuldeep Singh a memorandum demanding that the Ahmadis be stopped from using Islamic symbols and name of Prophet Muhammad for the propagation of their faith. The memorandum also made it clear that if they did not discontinue misleading poor Muslims in their *jalsa*, the Muslim community would feel compelled to take hard measures.

The protestors on the 26th burnt copies of *Hind Samachar,* as it was publishing positive stories about Ahmadis and not covering MAIH's protests against the visit of the minister, in the presence of media in Jagraon and Kotkapura, chanting these slogans: *Qadiani fitna murdabad, Hind Samachar murdabad, khatm-e nu-*

buwat zindabad (Down with the Ahmadi mischief! Down with *Hind Samachar*! Long Live finality of Muhammad's Prophethood!). While burning copies of *Hind Samachar* in Kotkapura a local leader Mohammad Azam Khan said: "This newspaper today carried an advertisement from the Ahmadis that claimed that the Ahmadiyya community had come to existence as per a prediction of the Prophet Mohammad. This is a conspiracy on the part of a *batil* (false) community to mislead people in the name of the Prophet. This newspaper is *barabar ka sharik* (co-participant) in this false propaganda." (Quote carried by all three sample newspapers on 27 December.) He also accused *Hind Samachar* of being at the forefront in giving prominence to the Ahmadiyya ads and news that hurt the religious sentiments of Muslims.

Similarly, Dr Muhammad Shaukat burnt copies of *Hind Samachar* in Jagraon and accused the newspaper of being sold out to the Ahmadis. He further mentioned that they would wage a campaign against the Ahmadis as well as this newspaper if it did not stop hurting religious sentiments of the Muslims. He thought it was shameful that "*Hind Samachar* has not published even a single news about protest against the Qadianis, contrarily, it has published an article in praise of Qadianis and has gone to the extent of saying that *jalsa salana* at Qadian is equivalent to Haj". (Quote carried by all three sample newspapers on 27 December.)

28 December 2009

On 28 December *Sahafat* informed its readers that taking note of the appeal of HRSL and protests that continued for two days, Mukherjee had cancelled his visit to Qadian. The MAIH volunteers who were at the forefront of organising protests celebrated Mukherjee's decision and considered it their victory. Due to two-day-long intensive state-wide protests, the Ahmadis could not succeed in influencing even a single Muslim from rural Punjab to attend *jalsa* in 2009. Consequently, the event failed miserably and only 150 Ahmadis who came from Pakistan were present at the venue. The newspaper also claimed that around a dozen prominent non-Muslim leaders also declined to attend *jalsa*.

Discussion and analysis

The previous section described the sequence of events as they unfolded on the ground after the announcement of and later cancellation of Mukherjee's visit. This section will analyse the newspaper reports to illuminate on journalistic practices of Urdu news.

Journalistic practices in Urdu dailies

A comparison of the reports that HE, HS and *Sahafat* carried on 26 December 2009 confirms that apart from typos and style of using honorific titles, the same text was verbatim produced in all of them. HS and *Sahafat* presented it as a report prepared by their bureaus and did not acknowledge that it was a press release issued by MAIH while HE did. HS carried the full text of the press release. *Sahafat* and HE published a shorter report, omitting from the tail of press release some details about burning of effigies of Ahmadism and Mukherjee. HS and *Sahafat* carried the report on the front page along with photographs while HE on an inside page without any photograph.

What HS and *Sahafat* carried on 27 December was also a press release of MAIH, without any effort to copyedit it. Three photographs that appeared with it were also the same in both newspapers. In fact, there was no difference in the order they appeared: protestors burning copies of *Hind Samachar* in Jagraon, MAIH General Secretary submitting memorandum to the Deputy Commissioner in Ludhiana and protestors burning copies of *Hind Samachar* in Kotkapura. HS acknowledged that it received these photographs from MAIH while *Sahafat* did not mention the source. The press release appeared on the inside pages in both newspapers.

Interestingly, HE did not carry the press release that HS and *Sahafat* did on 27 December. The follow-up story that it published on 27 December was based on the views of Mufti Mahfuzur Rahman Usmani (MMRU), a Deobandi cleric from Bihar on Mukherjee's Qadian visit. HE News Bureau in Delhi prepared the story. According to the story, MMRU advised Mukherjee not to attend *jalsa* as his presence in the event would hurt religious sentiments of around 30 million Muslims. In his views, participation of a senior minister in the ceremony of traitors of the country is quite problematic. MMRU appealed to the President and General Secretary of the Congress Party to stop Mukherjee from attending *jalsa* otherwise it would suffer badly in future elections. The story carried a photograph of MMRU.

It seems that HE's decision on 26 December to acknowledge that the story is a press release and not a report filed by its reporter or prepared at the desk, forced HS and *Sahafat* to do the same by publishing MAIH's press release on 27 December as a press release. In an interesting move, HE unlike HS and *Sahafat* did not carry the press release and instead created a different but related story based on MMRU's views.

The report that *Sahafat* carried on 28 December on the front page was also a press release of MAIH. Interestingly, the press release draws on another press release by the Minority Cell of the Punjab Pradesh Congress Committee (MCPP-CC). It also reports a press conference organised by the MAIH President. It informs about the post-cancellation scenario at Qadian based on the information

provided by some eyewitnesses. Despite its total reliance on what MAIH had been sharing with *Sahafat*, it took the credit for getting Mukherjee's visit cancelled as it claimed on 28th of December: *roznama Sahafat ki khabar rang layi* (coverage of the protest in the daily *Sahafat* made its impact).

As usual, three photographs accompanied the press release as proof of the events and information mentioned in it. It seems that *Sahafat* was compelled by HS (which, unlike *Sahafat*, acknowledged on 27 December that MAIH was the source of both the report and photographs) to acknowledge that photographs were shared by MAIH. Interestingly, HS chose not to carry the MAIH press release.

Sahafat claimed that in a telephonic conversation with the daily on 27 December MAIH President praised the support that the daily had extended to its protests by launching a media movement (*sahafat ki tahrik*) against the Ahmadis and making it a success. However, along with a front-page report on the cancellation of Mukherjee's visit, HE published on 27 December a box-item whose caption read: MAIH thanked the media. Unlike *Sahafat*, it noted that the Muslim community appreciated the role that all the newspapers of Punjab, and especially *muslim akhbarat* (Muslim-owned newspapers) from Delhi and other parts of the country played in the protest movement against Mukherjee's visit and was thankful to them for their support.

On 29 December, HS and *Sahafat* did not carry any related news. However, as a follow-up to what it had published on 27 December, HE on 30 December reported the response of MMRU to the cancellation of Mukherjee's visit. MMRU thanked the Congress high command for convincing Mukherjee to not attend *jalsa* and categorised it as a great success of Muslims and failure of the Ahmadi's design. As usual, the story carried his photograph as well. HE claimed in this news-item on 29 December that it had received several phone calls from the Muslims of Punjab, Delhi and the neighbouring districts who welcomed Mukherjee's decision. Interestingly, like *Sahafat*'s claim on 28 December, the claim of HE on 29 December confirms that this newspaper too was an active participant in the campaign against the Ahmadis.

HE and *Sahafat* on 31 December published a press release of MAIH with different headlines. According to the press release, MAIH had followed a well-planned strategy to get the visit cancelled. It had sent a fax message to the Prime Minister and all ministers of the central government saying that MAIH and the Muslim community would not tolerate Mukherjee's visit to Qadian; and if he encouraged the Ahmadis by attending their annual congregation, the MAIH volunteers would not only make the Ahmadis stop the event but would feel compelled to launch a nation-wide movement against the central government. Responding to the appeal of MAIH President, around five hundred thousand (this figure is bound to be an exaggerated one as it is based on MAIH estimate) Muslims in different parts of

Punjab came on the streets against the visit. Interestingly, HE and *Sahafat* both claimed that National General Secretary of MAIH shared this information with its correspondent in an exclusive meeting in Delhi while his photograph that accompanied the news report was the same in both newspapers!

The second story that *Sahafat* carried on the same day provided the reaction of two *ulama* from Moradabad to the Mukherjee's decision to cancel his Qadian visit. Office-bearers of the Moradabad branch of JUH welcomed Mukherjee's decision and congratulated *Sahafat* for bringing the truth to Mukherjee's notice. Appreciating the role of *Sahafat* in this episode, one of them said that *Sahafat* enthusiastically published it (*roznama Sahafat ne ise purzor tariqa se shaya kiya*). Originated in Moradabad, the story was written by *Sahafat* Bureau and carried passport size photograph of both *ulama*.

Contestations around field autonomy of Urdu news

In this section, I will return to the question of how the success of an interest group's media strategy reflects on the relationship between normative structure and journalistic practices of Urdu news posed at the beginning of the paper.

The case of Mukherjee's unrealised visit to Qadian evidences that medium-size Urdu newspapers receive press releases from *ulama*-led interest groups like MAIH on a regular basis. That some of these press releases get prominent placement signifies their high relevance for Urdu readers and newspapers' financial inability to use informal or enterprise channels to get first-hand information on the issues discussed in the press releases. Hence, these interest groups as key actors in Urdu public sphere are among the principal sources of information that provide 'information subsidies' to Urdu newspapers through their press releases. Oscar Gandy (1982: 8) defines 'information subsidies' as "efforts to reduce the prices faced by others for certain information, in order to increase its consumption". He includes press releases among "information subsidies" as they heavily subsidise the cost of information gathering for the reporters. In agreement with Leon Sigal (1973), Gandy maintains that the nature of the relations between news sources and reporters is essentially economic and hence 'information subsidies' too "operate on the basis of simple economic rules" (Gandy 1980: 106). However, the reason to provide such subsidies lies in the desire of news sources to control the "availability and interpretation of information about issues affecting their welfare" (Gandy 1980: 104), and hence they accept routine channels that is press releases, handouts, etc. MAIH through its press releases to a large extent controlled the flow of information about and interpretation of Mukherjee's visit.

Since *ulama* and their organisations perform majority of the agitprop activities that are done in the name of Islam in India, Urdu newspapers regard them as 'genuine' players of the Muslim politics. Neither any newspaper nor MAIH tried

to take along or provide any representation to masses and non-Deobandi ulama (Deobandi tradition of Indian Islam lays emphasis on reform of Muslims so that they strictly follow Islamic scriptures in their everyday life. Two other major traditions of Indian Islam are Ahl-e Hadis and Barelwi). It seemed as though MAIH, its volunteers and Deobandi *ulama* are the sole representatives of the Muslim community in Punjab. Protests were managed from the mosques where related meetings and press conferences were held. The fact that the ulama are not only consumers of Urdu newspapers but also creators and sponsors of news-worthy content and frames, enables them to wield powerful influence over the Urdu news field. If the volume of information traffic and interplay of influence between two social fields happen to be high, their interrelations are considered to be strong and they share the relationship of being neighbouring field of each other. By this logic, the religious field is the neighbouring field of Urdu news.

By continuous sharing of updates about their activities, Muslim interest groups display a sort of trust on Urdu dailies and by frequently publishing these updates in the form of press releases the newspapers demonstrate that they identify with the cause of these groups. Cancellation of Mukherjee's visit symbolised the success of MAIH's campaign which had a strong media component. 'Muslim-owned newspapers from Delhi' received special appreciation in the congratulatory message for their role in making the anti-Ahmadi campaign a success. MAIH President personally phoned these Urdu dailies to thank them (HE 27 December 2009).

In the Urdu news field that is largely divided between Muslim-owned and non-Muslim-owned outlets, *Hind Samachar* stands out as a non-Muslim-owned newspaper, which did not extend any media support to the anti-Ahmadi campaign. Moreover, unlike Muslim-owned newspapers, it carried Ahmadis' ads and news-items. This positive journalistic treatment provoked MAIHs' volunteers to burn its copies in Jagraon and Kotkapura. Since this journalistic stance did not reflect the dominant cultural ideology of Urdu news field, MAIH's volunteers accused it of "sell-out journalism" and hurting religious sentiments of Muslims.

Using press releases published verbatim in the sample newspapers, this case study establishes a symbiotic relationship between ulama-led Muslim interest groups and Urdu dailies. A possible reason for this symbiosis is that there is an almost complete lack of habitus gap between Urdu journalists and their sources i.e., MAIH activists and ulama as they share at least a major part of their habitus. Among those elements that are common to the habitus of both the journalists and MAIH sources is the notion that Ahmadis are not Muslims. This habitus affinity naturalised the editorial decision to publish the MAIH press releases as news-items without providing Ahmadis's perspective on the issue in question. Benson (2014: 27) observes: "One might expect habitus affinities to contribute to more

(and more positive) news coverage of some groups, whereas habitus disaffinities could contribute to less (and less positive) news coverage of other groups". Hence, MAIH's trust on Muslim-owned Urdu newspapers and the latter's identification with the cause of MAIH should be understood in terms of the workings of habitus affinities.

The historical conditions that shaped the formation of the Urdu news field in the colonial period, offer another possible explanation for the symbiotic relationship between *ulama*-led interest groups like MAIH and Urdu newspapers. Many prominent Urdu journalists, who were at the forefront of anti-British freedom struggle, were *ulama* and representatives of such interest groups. Also, Muslim-owned Urdu newspapers give positive and prominent coverage to campaigns and movements launched by *ulama*-led interest groups on issues related to the cultural identity of Indian Muslims. Coverage in Urdu newspapers of agitations in 1985-86 against the Supreme Court verdict in Shah Bano case which were led by All India Muslim Personal Law Board illustrates this point well (See Mody 1987: 949-50). Thus, due to similarity in their cultural politics, the *ulama* and Urdu journalists have been fellow travellers for long and have earned each other's trust over a long period of time. The symbolic capital (in the form of mutual trust and nationalist credentials) which the members of MAI and MAIH acquired through its participation in anti-Ahmadis agitations and ideological alignment with JUH and the Congress Party got smoothly converted into a form of capital that made MAIH an influential player in the fields of minority politics and Urdu news.

Because of its high degree of heteronomy and low degree of autonomy, the media field in Bourdieusian sociology is conceptualised as a "very weakly autonomous field" (Bourdieu 2005: 33). The autonomous pole in the case of Urdu news is constituted of its normative structure and professional logic. The extent of near-totalising influence that MAIH exercised on the sample newspapers was indicative of weak autonomy of Urdu news. The violation of journalistic code of fair representation (i.e., not providing any Ahmadi perspective on the issue in question) and objectivity (i.e., verbatim re-production of MAIH press releases) runs contrary to the professional logic of the field and evidences its weak autonomy.

However, the fact that the newspapers under study are medium-size newspapers owned by individuals, cannot furnish a convincing explanation for weak autonomy (erosion of professional logic) of Urdu news in its struggle against the powerful influence of neighbouring religious field. Reports on the Ahmadis are always negative and exclude the Ahmadi perspective whether published in medium and small-size newspapers owned by individuals or corporate houses like *Inquilab* and RS. The fact that owners of corporate-owned newspapers follow Hinduism does not make any difference in this regard. Since these newspapers also operationalise dominant ideology of Urdu news field, they may differ in terms of

frequency of publishing such reports but not in terms of frames and journalistic treatment.

Only *Hind Samachar* stands out as an aberration to this widespread trend of negative coverage of Ahmadis and hence needs a different explanation. *Hind Samachar* is a part of the Hind Samachar Group that is a big media house with presence in Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu news markets. Unlike its Hindi daily *Punjab Kesari* or Punjabi daily *Jag Bani* (for their profile, see Jeffrey 1997a & 1997b), *Hind Samachar* is on the decline. It cannot survive only on the subscription fee from its Ahamdi audience, a tiny fraction of an already miniscule number of Urdu readers in Punjab. Its core audience, Urdu-reading Punjabi Hindus and Sikhs of the partition generation who were concentrated in Delhi and Punjab have almost disappeared. On the contrary, core audience of HE, HS and *Sahafat* are Muslims of Bihar, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh and these newspapers are currently trying to enter the news market of Punjab as well.

Hence, the normative structure and cultural politics of Urdu news shared by all Muslim-owned Urdu newspapers, appears to be more convincing an explanation of the difference in the way these four newspapers reported MAIH's agitations than the difference in their ownership structure as neither of them did it for financial gains alone. In other words, it is not poor financial conditions of these newspapers that render autonomy of Urdu news weak vis-à-vis the influence of neighbouring field of religion, rather it is their normative structure and cultural politics. *Hind Samachar* by publishing reports about MAIH's protests and other three newspapers by publishing Ahmadis' advertisements would have definitely gained commercial benefits but they chose not to do so.

Rajagopal (2001) through his study of the Ayodhya movement coverage in Hindi news has shown that well-planned campaigns couched in the religious idiom and imagery, successfully secure positive coverage and such a success owes more to normative structure of news field than to the ownership structure. This line of argument does not downplay the importance of commercial logic of news media rather emphasises the role of an overlap of commercial and cultural (ideological) logics in sustaining Urdu newspapers. This alignment of both logics is 'given' in the case of Muslim-owned Urdu newspapers while deliberately achieved by Hindu-owned newspapers to ensure their commercial success.

Inter-field dynamics of Urdu news

This section will use four variables proposed by Marchetti (2005: 76-79) to analyse inter-field relationships of Urdu news, i.e., its interactions with the political and religious fields in the context of Mukherjee's Qadian visit. First variable is the interdependence of a field's economy with that of the field of activity being covered. Among three key revenue streams of Indian media (state patronage, commercial

ads and subscription fee), the sampled newspapers rely mainly on state patronage and subscription fee. They attract very little commercial ads being the independently owned medium-size Urdu newspapers. Revenue from NGOs could be an additional revenue stream. Ulama-led interest groups constitute majority of the NGO sector in Urdu public sphere. Due to lack of data, it is not clear how much this revenue stream constitutes of the total budget of these newspapers. Though Urdu news is dependent on the religious field whose activity it frequently covers, nature and extent of the economic aspect of their interdependence is not clear, and hence requires attention of media scholars.

The second variable is the degree of control the field (and its institutions) has on its own coverage. It is clear from the above discussion that the religious field has considerable control over its own coverage in Urdu news, as MAIH's all press releases appeared almost verbatim in Muslim-owned Urdu newspapers. Like Urdu news, the political field also proved to be quite susceptible to the influence of religious field. These newspapers reasoned that the cancellation of Mukherjee's visit was in response to the appeal of MAIH President and protests of its volunteers. However, the MAIH's leadership, as mentioned earlier, acknowledged that the whole-hearted support of Urdu news amplified the impact of protests on the Congress party.

The third indicator is the degree to which media field imposes its own logic and internal hierarchies upon the field it is covering. Urdu news being a 'very weakly autonomous' field has not been able to impose its own logic on the field it covers. Rather, Urdu newspapers succumbed to pressures from the religious field they were covering in the case of Mukherjee's visit and compromised their 'objectivity' which Soloski (1989:213) defines as reporting of facts by the journalists "as fairly and in as balanced a way as possible". He considers 'objectivity' as "the most important professional norm" of news profession. They did so (compromised their professionalism) by not being honest with their readers about their sources, about their method of gathering information and by not providing any voice to the Ahmadis who were targeted in MAIH's press releases.

The last indicator is the social characteristics of social actors. Discussions in the preceding sections deal with social characteristics of actors of the religious and political fields in detail with the help of notions such as habitus and cultural capital of different social actors as well as historical conditions for the evolution of normative structure of Urdu news. Educational trajectories of Urdu journalists suggest that a good number of them have received at least a few years of their education in madrasas. So, despite their divergent professional trajectories, there exists a significant social proximity among them and actors of the religious field. In addition, there are elements of overlaps between their habitus. It is in this sense that Marchetti suggests that interactions among various social fields at the level

of social actors should be understood as "meetings between different habitus and different positions in the field" (Marchetti 2005: 76). However, elements of habitus affinity, as already shown, skew struggle of these actors for dominance and recognition in favour of a set of actors. The symbolic capital (in the form of mutual trust and nationalist credentials) which MAIH acquired through its participation in the anti-British struggles, ideological opposition to the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan and ideological alignment with the Congress Party compelled the latter to honour the demand of MAIH to prevent Mukherjee from participating in *jalsa*. Hence, given its closely entwining relationship among fields, Urdu news plays a "crucial mediator" among the religious and the political fields.

Conclusion

By focusing on the inter-field relationship of media and religious fields, this study has demonstrated the existence of a symbiosis between *ulama*-led interest groups and Muslim-owned Urdu dailies which the actors of the religious field use to influence decisions made in the political field. It explains the existence and endurance of the symbiosis in terms of historical formation of Urdu news field, ownership structure of Urdu newspapers and their cultural politics. Use of Marchetti's (2005) four variables has helped illuminate different aspects of this symbiosis: ambivalence about economic interdependence of Urdu news and Muslim interest groups, control over coverage, autonomy of both fields and social characteristics of actors located in each field. Social and educational trajectories of Urdu journalists shape outcome of their professional socialisation and make autonomy of Urdu news weak. Benson's (2013) concepts of habitus affinities and habitus gap draw attention to importance of weak autonomy to sustain such a symbiosis. Likewise, utility of information subsidies depends upon ideological underpinnings of their content. Both press releases of MAIH and advertisements of Ahmadis were information subsidies, however, Muslim-owned Urdu newspapers could use only the former while *Hind Samachar* only the latter due to difference in their cultural politics.

Another key theme that this paper highlighted is the impact of exclusionary politics of Urdu news on mediated Muslim identity. Joshua Meyrowitz (1997:59) argues that news media 'are themselves social contexts that foster certain forms of interactions and social identities'. The argument also holds true in the case of Urdu news, which serves as a social context that mediates construction of a particular type of Muslim identity through its strategic location within the field of power. The MCPPCC Chairman clarified in a press release on 27 December that "the Congress Party does not have anything to do with the Ahmadiyya community" (*Congress party ka qadiani jamat se koi talluq nahi hai*). By distancing itself from the Ahmadis, it succumbed to MAIH's demands including denial of Ahmadis'

rights to a fair media representation.

MAIH's discourse of 'othering' of the Ahmadis prefers to question their religious identity as well as their political identity (citizenship credentials and territorial loyalty to the Union of India). It selectively forgets social cleavages among Muslims along the lines of caste, language, region, etc. Urdu news helped MAIH execute its project of 'othering' at the cost of citizenship and fair media rights of the Ahmadis, a minority within the minority.

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