

2005 EARTHQUAKE AND LESSONS IN DISASTER REPORTING: A  
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF LOCAL AND NATIONAL DAILIES

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**Abstract:**

Media's role in the society as a watchdog or its role in shaping public opinion is quite well known. Media's role in the wake of a disaster is equally important particularly for disseminating information and highlighting the magnitude of the problem. Importance of disaster reporting has also been acknowledged by world bodies like United Nations. The October 8, 2005 earthquake, also called Kashmir earthquake, was a major seismological disturbance to hit the region. The 7.6 magnitude left over 1800 people dead and 4500 injured in Jammu and Kashmir. Over the last nearly three decades, Kashmir's armed conflict has served as a staple diet for media. With the occurrence of October 8 earthquake, both the local and national press was for the first time set with task of disaster reporting. Transition from conflict reporting to disaster reporting tested the flexibility of local media to cope with new challenges. This research paper would deal with the print media coverage (local as well as national) in the aftermath of the earthquake. In the light of the disaster reporting standards, the researcher will analyse the coverage of October 8 earthquake to gain an understanding for better disaster reporting in future.

**Key Words:** Disaster Reporting, Kashmir Earthquake & Print Media

**1. Introduction:**

Jammu and Kashmir is a seismically active region. Parts of Jammu and Kashmir fall under Zone V "very severe" and Zone IV "severe" categories, according to the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) which classified different regions in India into zones II to V, based on their earthquake records, tectonic activities and damage caused. Srinagar was listed among twenty-nine Indian cities and towns, including Delhi and capitals of nine states, which fall under "severe" to "very severe" seismic zones – highly vulnerable to earthquakes – according to the National Centre for Seismology [1].

**1.1 October 2008 Earthquake:** The Kashmir earthquake (also known as the South Asia earthquake) of 2005 was a major seismological disturbance that occurred at 09:20:38 India Standard Time on October 8, 2005 with the epicenter around 19 km northeast of Muzaffarabad in the Pakistan-administered Kashmir. The earthquake was classified as 'major' by the USGS (United States Geological Survey), measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale. The hypocenter was located at a depth of 26 km below the surface. In its preliminary earthquake report, USGS observed that at least 86000 people were killed and more than 69000 injured with extensive damage reported in northern Pakistan. The heaviest damage occurred in Muzaffarabad where entire villages were destroyed. It also caused widespread damage and destruction in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, especially Tangadhar area of Kupwara district and Uri in Baramulla district. The impact was felt in most parts of Northern India. Following the main earthquake over 50 aftershocks of magnitude greater than 5 on the Richter scale were felt in the affected area. At the request of the Government of India, the United Nations, World Bank and Asian Development Bank undertook an assessment of the impact of the October 8, 2005 earthquake in the affected areas of Jammu and Kashmir. A team of experts drawn from the three institutions visited the worst affected areas of Jammu and Kashmir to undertake the assessment. According to the report, over 1,000 were killed and 6,000 wounded in J&K. People in the affected areas were already made vulnerable by geographic isolation and the political/security situation. At least 32,335 buildings collapsed in Anantnag, Baramulla, Jammu and Srinagar. Nearly 30,000 families were left without permanent shelter. Education and health facilities were destroyed and basic services disrupted. Furthermore, the ground shaking caused numerous landslides and rockfalls to be triggered that damaged roads and bridges, blocking access to heavily damaged areas and hampering the relief effort [2]. As Saturday is a normal school day in the region, most students were at schools when the earthquake struck. Many were buried under collapsed school buildings. Many people were trapped in their homes and because it was Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting, most people were taking a nap after their pre-dawn meal and did not have time to escape when the quake struck [3].

**1.1.1 'Line of Control' becomes 'Line of Calamity':** The areas on and around the Line of Control, the de facto border dividing Indian- and Pakistan-administered Kashmir, faced the brunt of the quake. India and Pakistan collaborated to assist the disaster response by lessening restrictions along the LoC. On 19 October 2005, telephone links were restored across the LoC which enabled family members to contact each other much more easily. Over a nine-day period in November 2005, the governments opened up five locations along the LoC for relief supplies to cross. Civilians were soon permitted to cross at one of these checkpoints for the purpose of seeking missing family members [4]. This 'earthquake diplomacy' evoked widespread support. The post-quake developments were significant given the fact that the region has been a bone of contention between India and Pakistan ever since the partition of the sub-continent in 1947. Infact, the two countries have gone to war three times over the region in the past. As such there has been a strong presence of military forces on either side of the divide. The inhabitants of the border areas have been suffering owing to frequent shelling from both sides. When nature struck with full force in the form of the October 8 earthquake it shook up the entire region sidelining the human demarcations even though the two countries had declared ceasefire and worked out certain confidence building measures including the opening of trans-border Srinagar-Muzaffarabad road, towards the peaceful settlement of all the outstanding issues.

**1.2 Natural Disasters and Role of Media:** Media's role in the wake of a disaster is important particularly for disseminating information and highlighting the magnitude of the problem. Besides, it also acts as a watchdog in the aftermath of a disaster thereby mitigating the problems of survivors. Media also plays a role in inculcating empathy in people regarding the victims by

presenting the various facets of the tragedy. In the era of satellite television, scoop journalism and breaking news, the speed and reach with which news is broadcast is unprecedented. Within minutes of the October 8 earthquake, images of the razed Margala towers in Islamabad were flashed on the TV screens around the world. Before the administration could even assess the damage, the reporters were ready with their dispatches. Elsewhere in the news studios, experts were called for analysis. Precautionary measures were suggested to the viewers. Computer graphics displayed the topography of the affected region and the record of previous disasters. Before the officials could bring out a statement, a viewer was already well equipped with necessary information about the overall ground situation. According to Scanlon (2011) the social science literature has established that the media play a key role in many aspects of crisis and disasters. "Mass media participation is critical, for example, for effective warning and the mass media may be the glue that binds societies in certain occasions. Yet the media are also responsible for many of the misconceptions that exist about disaster, misconceptions that may lead to errors of judgment when disaster strikes" [5].

**1.2.1 PCI Guidelines for Reporting on Natural Calamities:** Press Council of India (PCI) has laid down norms for reporting on natural calamities. These include:

- ✓ Facts and data relating to natural calamities shall be checked up thoroughly from authentic sources and then published with due restraint in a manner bereft of sensationalism, exaggeration, surmises or unverified facts.
- ✓ Natural or man-made hazards become disasters through acts of commission and omission of the society. Therefore, the disastrous impact can be minimized by preventive action taken by all the stakeholders including the media.
- ✓ Media should give wide publicity to the do's and don'ts and the potential benefits of disaster mitigation so that the society follows them before, during and after the occurrence of the disasters. People should be detailed on standard guidelines. The issues of children and women which are the most vulnerable groups during and after disaster should be handled carefully by the media.
- ✓ It is necessary to have complete cooperation between the media and all governmental and non governmental agencies. The extent of the coordination and cooperation between them determines the nature, the degree and the scale of the preparedness to prevent or meet the disasters [6].

**1.2.2 Disaster Reporting - Experiences and Standards:** Disaster reporting has emerged as a specialized field of journalism. Importance of disaster reporting has also been acknowledged by world bodies like United Nations. As part of its disaster debate, UN also set out guidelines for disaster reporting at its Yokohama convention. According to the principles set by the United Nations World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction in Yokohama, Japan in 1994, media throughout the world shall play a vital role in educating the people about disasters, warning of hazards, gathering and transmitting information, alerting government officials, relief organizations and public. It asserts that timely, accurate and sensitive communications can save lives, reduce property damage and increase public understanding. It further states that Disaster Mitigation Organizations (DMOs) should seek to develop working relationships with media and provide reliable information as early as possible. Media organizations should, in turn, address disaster prevention and reduction in coverage relating to disasters. Media organizations are also encouraged to evaluate their reporting and seek to work with DMOs to improve the quality, accuracy and thoroughness of such reporting [7]. Experiences show that media's initiatives to inform, educate and empower communities for influencing public action and policy towards disaster preparedness and mitigation are very useful. Public education and communication through electronic and print media, and alternative media could educate about hazards, prevention and preparedness. Media could be an effective early warning system. Early warning dissemination through radio stations has made a big difference in the past. Dave (2017) compares cyclones of November 1970, May 1985 and May 1994 in Bangladesh. The loss of life was significantly lesser in 1985 and 1994 because there was better dissemination of disaster warnings. Similarly, 1977 cyclone in Andhra Pradesh killed 10000 people while a similar storm in the same area 13 years later killed only 910. "The dramatic difference", Dave asserts, "was due to the fact that a new warning system connected with radio stations to alert people in low-lying areas was put in place" [8]. Disasters in South Asia are dealt with a retrospective approach. Journalists react to events and file their write ups after something has happened. Media largely perceives a disaster as an event of nature, which carries an element of drama, misery and sensation. For media, any disaster is like any other news. It does not have time to treat it as a special beat. Besides, there are operational constraints including tight deadlines, space limitations and logistical obstacles in access to information. Disaster reporting in media is pre-occupied with an event-based approach. Media views natural calamities as events. Event driven reporting is 'passive' journalism while process based reporting contributes to 'active' journalism. The belief that only events, not processes make news distorts understanding. A sudden disaster event can be put in context by asking- how it occurred, why it occurred and if it could have been averted. Accuracy, balance and clarity are crucial for meaningful disaster reporting. Unbalanced and unclear reporting can create panic and anxiety and media source may lose credibility. Disaster reporting can be done in three phases: Non-Disaster, Pre-Disaster and Post-Disaster Phase. In the Non-Disaster Phase, media can spend time in understanding the dynamics of disasters, looking at government and non-government disaster organization's preparedness and strategies. In the Pre-Disaster Phase, media can collect and disseminate information about early warnings and communicate weather forecasts to communities at risk. Media can pose questions like what preparations are being done, is there enough coordination between responsible departments and has the public been informed about measures undertaken to cope with eventuality? In the Post-Disaster Phase, media performs the news and information role. It performs assistance role in disaster control by transmitting information from the field/spot and instructions from the authorities to the risk prone community. Media also transmits information from the community to the authorities helping their decision making capability.

**1.3 October 8 Earthquake and Media's Role:** Over the last nearly three decades, much of the media coverage related to Kashmir has been about the armed conflict. Indeed this conflict centric reporting is the part and parcel of any conflict anywhere in the world. With the occurrence of the October 8 earthquake, both the local and national press was for the first time set with task of disaster reporting. There was a marked shift from conflict reporting to disaster reporting. Transition from conflict reporting to disaster reporting tested the flexibility of local media to cope with new challenges. This research deals with the print media

coverage (regional as well as national) in the aftermath of the earthquake. In the light of the disaster reporting standards, the researcher has tried to carry out comprehensive analysis of the press coverage of October 8 earthquake to gain an understanding for better disaster reporting in future.

## 2. Objectives:

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- ✓ To analyse nature and extent of October 8 earthquake coverage by local and national press
- ✓ To identify dominant themes in the earthquake-related media coverage
- ✓ To assess comparative coverage of October 8 earthquake by local and national newspapers

## 3. Methodology:

**3.1 Content Analysis:** Content Analysis method was used for the study since it is a formal system that helps researchers in “drawing conclusions from observations of content” [9] especially of newspapers, magazines and television programmes. It involves analysis of the content of documents and written records with the objective of describing and classifying. It is a research technique for making replicable valid inferences from data to their context. It is regarded as an objective, systematic and quantitative technique [10]. The present study analyzes news reports and editorials of selected Indian mainstream and local newspapers for coverage related to October 8, 2005 earthquake.

**3.2 Content Category & Unit of Analysis:** The content categories studied included hard news, soft news and editorials. The unit of analysis included the ‘theme’ of each category. The analysis has been made in terms of presence of the content category, the frequency with which it appears and the space allotted to each category. Prominence and significance of stories as suggested by type-size of headlines, placement, boxed or shadowed item and column space was also taken into consideration.

**3.3 Sample:** Two national dailies viz., ‘Times of India’ and ‘Hindustan Times’ and two local dailies viz., ‘Greater Kashmir’ and ‘Kashmir Times’ were selected for this study. ‘Times of India’ is the most circulated English national daily closely followed by ‘Hindustan Times’. According to the latest Indian Readership Survey (IRS) report, the total readership of ‘The Times of India’ stood at over 13 million, making it the largest circulated English daily followed by ‘Hindustan Times’ which commands a readership of over 6.8 million [11]. ‘Greater Kashmir’ is the most widely circulated English daily of Kashmir province and ‘Kashmir Times’ is the oldest English daily of Jammu province. After its launch as a weekly in 1987, ‘Greater Kashmir’ was converted into a daily in 1993 and has emerged as the largest circulated English newspaper of Kashmir valley with estimated circulation of around 60,000 [12]. Started in 1954 as a weekly, The Kashmir Times was converted into a daily in 1964 and is being published regularly since then. According to the website of the daily, ‘The Kashmir Times’ is the oldest circulated English newspaper of Jammu and Kashmir with an estimated readership of two million [13].

**3.4 Reference Period:** Issues of the four selected newspapers in the post-quake phase from October 09 to October 31, 2005 were referred for the purpose of this research.

## 4. Findings:

**4.1 Greater Kashmir:** The hard news items of ‘Greater Kashmir’ ranged from political statements, official and unofficial casualty figures, and rescue, relief and rehabilitation efforts. The lack of coordination in the government machinery and the subsequent failure on its part to mitigate the grievances of victims was implied in different stories. Cases of mishandling of relief by the officials were exposed in some stories. Natural constraints like tough terrain and bad weather hampering rescue and relief activities were also noted. Efforts of common people to help their brethren in affected areas were highly appreciated. Role of voluntary organizations was mentioned from time to time. India-Pakistan relations were observed in the light of the tragedy. Various measures taken jointly by the two archrivals were given due prominence. *Greater Kashmir’s* Sunday edition ‘GK Plus’ carried human-element stories from quake-hit areas on all Sundays of October 2005, including first-hand accounts of victims. Role of doctors was appreciated. Failure of state administration to reach some quake hit areas even after repeated claims was pointed out. Issues concerning children and women who survived the killer quake were also consistently covered. Appeals of divided families to restore communication links were given due space. Resilience of quake victims in the face of a huge challenge to start their lives afresh was implied in several stories. The purpose of an editorial is to comment and to present the viewpoint of the paper on the whole. In the aftermath of the October 8 disaster, there were as many as 12 editorials published in *Greater Kashmir* commenting on the various aspects of the post-earthquake situation. The number of editorials is a clue as to the importance given by the paper to the tragedy. The main themes explored were disaster management, rehabilitation programmes, cross-border communication and public philanthropy. Calls for recovery of the affected education infrastructure were also the part of editorial policy. GK editorials were by and large critical of the government regarding the relief and rehabilitation efforts.

**4.2 Kashmir Times:** Most of the hard stories carried by ‘Kashmir Times’ in the aftermath of October 8 earthquake pertained to the death and destruction caused in affected areas, role of state and central government, relief and rescue operations and political statements related to the tragedy. Army was appreciated for its role in rescue and relief operations. The announcement of relief packages and other relief and rehabilitation schemes by Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh were lead stories in different issues of ‘Kashmir Times’. The lack of preparedness manifested in the lack of coordination and bottleneck in relief distribution was highlighted in different stories throughout the period. The presence of some unscrupulous elements collecting funds in the name of relief was noticed in some of the stories. The monitoring of quake relief by NHRC and other central agencies was also implied in some stories. The various constraints in proper rescue and relief operations like bad weather and difficult terrain were highlighted from time to time. Government’s failure to set up state disaster management cell even after repeated recommendations was given due coverage. The efforts of civil society were also appreciated. India’s offer to help Pakistan was given due prominence. The coordinated efforts by India and Pakistan in quake hit areas across the border were also highlighted from time to time. KT was the first daily to break the story regarding the ill-equipped hospitals to handle disaster casualties. Threat of epidemic in affected areas was also duly investigated. Panic among the people in the wake of October 08 earthquake was sketched by means of eye-witness accounts and comments from locals in the soft stories carried by ‘Kashmir Times’. The negligence on part of state

administration to safeguard the historical monuments of Jammu province was also exposed after some of them crumbled under quake impact. The story of Basti Ram Tandon, native of Jammu who lost his life in the quake at his ancestral village in Pakistan-administered Kashmir was consistently covered in several issues. Sob stories of survivors were carried consistently. Concerns of divided families regarding their loved ones across the border also made it to front-page of several editions. Issues concerning the children who survived the killer quake were also consistently covered. *'Kashmir Times'* extensively covered health beat and came up with accounts of suffering children. Failure of state administration to reach some quake hit areas like Poonch and Karnah was given due prominence. Needs of victims in their own words was covered in several issues. Recovery of normal life in the affected areas was covered in the later part of the month. The psychological imprints left on the people's minds by the unexpected tragedy were also addressed in several stories. The editorials of *'Kashmir Times'* were highly critical of the state government for its lack of preparedness in the light of October 8 disaster. It also criticized politicians for cashing on the disaster as a photo-opportunity and urged them to rise above petty politics and related political gimmicks. The editorials also stressed on the need for urgent measures to allow the divided families in the affected region across LoC to communicate.

**4.3 Times of India:** The main themes of the hard stories carried by *'Times of India'* in the aftermath of the quake were: death, devastation and despair caused by the killer quake. Issues related to kids and women in the affected region were covered in several stories. Diplomatic measures taken by India and Pakistan were also consistently followed. The role of armed forces was appreciated to a great extent. The other themes covered by the paper were compassion fatigue suffered by the Indian corporate sector and challenges up ahead for the rescue and relief teams due to harsh terrain and approaching winter season. Several human element stories were carried during the period by *'Times of India'*. Besides, corporate indifference and public philanthropy was implied in some stories. There were far lesser soft stories related to the killer quake and unlike the regional dailies, the soft stories were rarely carried on front-page. But considering the national status and the subsequent requirements of the newspaper, it would not have been possible to carry the soft stories to the extent as the regional dailies did. There were far less editorials regarding the tragedy in *'Times of India'*. The need was, to some extent, made up by the articles published in the daily. The themes deliberated were cross-border help, disaster preparedness and priorities of Indian government in the wake of the earthquake.

**4.4 Hindustan Times:** The hard news stories published by *'Hindustan Times'* highlighted promptness of Indian soldiers in the rescue and relief operations and the appreciation of army's role by the victims. Laid back approach of corporate India was also pinpointed. The concern over the hampering of relief work due to bad weather was expressed in some stories. The other main themes of the hard stories carried by HT during the period were slow pace of relief in some of the affected areas, law and order problems in the quake-hit areas, steps taken by the state and the central governments for the rehabilitation. Besides, Indo-Pak cooperation in relief and rescue operations was also given due prominence. Restoration of tele-links across the border and the opening of LoC for relief exchange also made it to the front page. There were fewer soft or human-element stories in *'Hindustan Times'* than the regional dailies. But considering the national status of the paper and the subsequent limitations of space, the soft story coverage of HT is commendable. In its editorials, *'Hindustan Times'* compared the emotional indifference across much of India and the lukewarm response to the proactive approach in the disasters that struck other regions of India. The other themes deliberated upon included earthquake vulnerability of some regions in India, the need for joint strategies between India and Pakistan to cope with the natural disasters in the region, misery of the victims due to delayed relief and the need for careful monitoring of LoC in the wake of Indian government's decision to open it at several points for relief exchange.

## **5. Conclusion:**

In the context of October 8 tragedy, both print and electronic media played an active role in the immediate aftermath of the quake. However, owing to the differences in the basic format of the two media, electronic and print media coverage differed. Whereas electronic media has the privilege of video/audio element, print media has more scope for in-depth coverage. Besides, for research purposes it is easier and more feasible to work on the back issues of newspapers. For the purpose of this study, the print media and its role in the disaster reporting in the aftermath of October 8 earthquake has been analysed. The coverage provided by the print media was also varied. The local, regional, national and international media treated the Kashmir earthquake differently, prioritizing and focusing on different issues related to the disaster. The common criticism that media treatment of disasters is stereotyped seemed to be true in certain cases particularly in state dailies. Criticism and skepticism in the local press about government was evident. Relief was either heroic or failed – there was nothing in between. No doubt the criticism was genuine to some extent but in certain instances, it seemed as if it was hyped unnecessarily. The positive side is that the state government was under pressure to deliver because its rescue, relief and rehabilitation efforts were being closely followed by the print media. The research also noted that national media seemed to suffer from compassion fatigue. This media fatigue becomes evident when the October 8 coverage is compared with the coverage of earlier disasters like Bhuj (Gujarat) earthquake. Public philanthropy and role of NGOs was given appreciable coverage. The NGOs helped the victims and in turn these organizations needed the media to try and get their message out which the later did. This resulted in publicity, which in turn helped generate more funding and attention for disaster relief. Politics is the mainstay of Indian press. Political dimensions of the disaster were not left unattended. In fact it formed the major theme of the news stories and editorials in the latter half of October. India-Pakistan relationships were observed in the backdrop of the common tragedy. The tragedy was seen as an opportunity for the two countries to come closer. Corporate India's lukewarm response was noted in media. Corporate donations for Tsunami and other previous disasters were compared with the donation status in the October 8 earthquake and a considerable difference was noted. Subsequently some of the private houses sent their teams to Kashmir with donations for the victims. The most heartening thing about the media coverage of October 8 earthquakes was the publication of human interest stories related to the affected areas. These soft stories highlighted the sufferings of the victims. Human element stories have come up in a big way and it is not surprising at all that most people these days prefer to read a first-hand account of a victim than a politician's statement regarding the tragedy. The indication of responsible and compassionate coverage comes from the frequency and importance given to the human element stories. In the pre-disaster phase, media's role is to call for measures to avoid tragedy or to keep the losses to

minimal. Media's watchdog function is most needed in the pre-disaster phase. But barring few stories, there was no real effort on part of press at any point of time before October 8 to stress the need for disaster management particularly when Kashmir falls in high seismic zone. If we consider the month following October 8 as disaster phase, media's role was commendable in this period. Media's role in the post-disaster phase was also positive but as such there was no sustained effort to press for disaster awareness, preparedness and management. During the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, much was reported on the aid and generosity from all quarters including government and public fundraising. Many organizations, government as well as non-government, offered large sums of money for aid. However, the media didn't probe whether the amount delivered was the same as initially pledged or how it was used. Just a few stories on the aid delivery would not only allow the public to see how their governments have responded to their outpouring of generosity, but also allow the public to keep up the pressure, and, without a lot of public having to dig around to find this information. Media needs to realise its role and responsibility for better disaster preparedness and mitigation. This research paper is limited in scope, but it may serve as a valuable reference and starting point for more research on the subject and perhaps better disaster reporting in future.

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