

Need For Objective And Responsible Media Reporting Of The Actions Of Armed Forces In Managing National Disasters: Case Study Of J&K Floods (2014) And Nepal Earthquake (2015)

Major General Amar Krishna (Retd)

Ph.D Scholar, Symbiosis International University, Pune

Abstract: *The main objectives of this research were to study the need for objective and responsive media reporting of the disaster rescue and relief operations conducted by the Armed Forces (AF). And, the effects that irresponsible media reporting has on the morale of the AF.*

To achieve the objectives of the research, an in-depth study of the national media's reporting of the disaster rescue and relief operations conducted by the AF in the case of J&K Floods (June 2014) and Nepal Earthquake (April 2015) was carried out.

The research shows that in both the above mentioned cases the assistance provided by the AF had been extremely prompt, effective and welcomed by the local populace and administration. However, the reporting of the same by the national media channels had been one of sensationalising the efforts of the Indian Government, humiliating/intimidating the victims/locals, rather than being of help to them in their hour of need, and the reporting aimed mainly to increase the TRP ratings of their own news channels.

The media has come under a lot of criticism for such immature, biased and irresponsible reporting of these very tragic events. This has, in turn, reduced the positive impact of the good work done by the AF, belittled the AF and affected the morale of its personnel, in spite of the good work done by them.

After a thorough analysis of all the results, it is fair to conclude that for an apolitical AF, such as ours, it is essential that media covers its operations and activities in a very mature, objective, humane and responsible manner. This is a very important aspect for portraying the correct picture of the rescue effort, and increasing the effectiveness of the AF in its disaster rescue and relief operations.

Keywords: *Armed Forces (AF), National Media, Disaster Rescue and Relief, Embedded Journalism*

I. INTRODUCTION

Media reporting of the rescue and relief activities of the AF during disasters is very important aspect in letting everyone know the correct picture of what is the actual 'condition on ground'. Reporting by the media needs to keep the essence of the tragic event, plight of the victims and the assistance being provided by all to mitigate the problems, foremost in mind.

Subjective, irresponsible and insensitive reporting can do great damage to the entire national effort and undo the

immense goodwill that the rescue and relief providing agencies would have gained in the early stages.

Correct reporting by the media goes a long way in helping to maintain the morale of the AF personnel and the same spurs them on towards greater and greater degrees of effectiveness.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The main objectives of the research were:

- ✓ To identify and study the nature of reporting by the Indian media covering the rescue and relief operations of

the AF during the Kashmir Floods (2014) and Nepal Earthquake (2015).

- ✓ The study the effect that irresponsible, immature and jingoistic reporting of events by the media has on the morale of the AF, even though their efforts had been lauded by the local populace and administration.
- ✓ To suggest measures to safeguard against such issues in future disaster rescue and relief operations undertaken by the AF.

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Loffelholz, M, (2013), states that, “Embedded journalism is the practice of placing journalists within and under the control of the AF during its operations. Embedded reporters and photographers are attached to a specific military unit and permitted to accompany the troops into areas of operation. Embedded journalism was introduced by the United States during the war with Iraq (2003–11), as a response to criticisms about the low level of access granted to journalists during earlier military operations.” It is also pertinent to note that, Embedded Journalism started more than 100 years ago, when Sir Winston Churchill worked first as an army officer (and simultaneously writing for press) and then as a war correspondent in various wars that took place in Cuba, Egypt and South Africa in the last decade of 19th century. His works were later published as books e.g. *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*, London to Ladysmith via Pretoria, Ian Hamilton's March, etc.

“Embedded journalism has added a new dimension to media coverage of operations of the AF. In early 2003, as it became increasingly apparent that a war between the United States and Iraq was imminent, the Department of Defense offered journalists the opportunity to join U.S. troops, after undergoing very basic military camp training and accepting a few ground rules. During the invasion of Iraq, approximately 600 embedded journalists were permitted to join the American forces.”

“On one hand, it was argued that a new standard of openness and immediacy had been created for coverage of the AF operations. Reporters directly involved in military action were believed to provide a more-incisive account of events by removing the speculation that was thought to surface by keeping the media at a distance. Others, though, viewed embedding more negatively, raising concerns about bias in reporting, being sympathetic to the operations of the AF, thereby tainting the objectivity that journalists are bound to uphold. One advantage of embedding was that it added a measure of protection for journalists who sometimes found themselves the target of violence by one or more sides in a conflict.”

Peer, Basharat, (2015), has highlighted that, “in the Srinagar Floods of 2014, wherever Indian helicopters dropped food packages, the embedded cameramen would zoom in at an angle that showed the desperate survivors in most inhumane light, scrambling like insects on the ground. When they were in rescue boats, they thrust their mikes into faces of people stuck in submerged homes and asked the most awkward and embarrassing of questions.”

“What the television networks did in Nepal was a repetition of how they covered the floods in Kashmir. In their gratitude to the Air Force officers who allowed them on the helicopters, their attempts at reporting briskly, turned into exercises in propaganda. A reminder that the humiliating coverage of the Kashmir floods has not been forgotten is in the popularity of a cartoon drawn by Mir Suhail, a young Kashmiri cartoonist for a Srinagar-based paper. It depicts a television news reporter poking out of an Indian soldier's uniform pocket with a camera. It has been one of the most used satirical images of the Nepal coverage.”



Figure 1

Fig 1 -“Indian earthquake relief is one thing, Indian (tv) media coverage of it quite something else.” Cartoon by Mirsuhail. This cartoon retrieved from <https://storify.com/anujanadkarni/ethical-dilemmas-of-reporting-trauma-indian-media-> aptly depicts the nature of media reporting that Indian National Media resorted to while covering the relief and rescue operations in Nepal. Such reporting belittled the good work done by the AF.

Nabi, Ghulam, (2014), has noted that, “with the state administration, in Kashmir, crumbling under the water, only two agencies could be seen working in the rescue operation. Firstly, it was Kashmir's young men, risking their lives, carrying out the rescue operation by using local Shikaras (boats) to save every stranded person; on the other, the Indian AF, using choppers and boats for the rescue purpose. However, the AF have been widely accused of giving preference to rescuing the elite, Indian tourists and Indian labourers, over the common Kashmiri.”

“The TV journalists, accompanying the rescue columns of the AF, kept harping on the ‘bravery and wholehearted’ effort of the troops to save Kashmiri people - the otherwise anti-national and antimilitary populace. In this scheme, the ‘chopper rescuers’ were wrongly projected by the media as the only messiah of the Kashmiri people.”

“Further, television studios started telecasting prime time shows and debates on AF ‘heroic efforts’ in the rescue operation. For example, India's much celebrated news anchor Ms Barkha Dutt, in her show “The Buck Stops here” on the evening of Jun 09, 2014, castigated the Hurriyat leadership for not acknowledging and praising the military rescue efforts. She went on to argue that the forces which, over the years, have been seen as alien and hated by the people of Kashmir, are the ones who are now saving the Kashmiri people. Thus, the argument was made and the message conveyed that the

Kashmir's should now pay back to India in the form of giving love, care to the Indian soldiers and embracing the Indian system, rather than continuously fighting them."

The biased Indian media continued projecting the AF as the only saviour of the local populace, and that a great mercy was being done on the people of Kashmir by the AF. This further alienated the locals from the AF, in spite of the great, selfless effort put in by the ordinary soldiers. They AF now felt let down by the media and that their brave efforts had lost its value, because of this irresponsible reporting. They felt that all the heroism, all the sacrifices, all that they had done, had been in vain.

He added that, "there is no disaster by nature; any natural calamity if not handled properly turns into a disaster."

Hafsa Kanzwal, (2014), has stated that, "the attempt by Indian authorities to take credit for relief effort had backfired. While the Indian army had played an important role in the rescue and relief efforts, claiming to rescue about 100,000 people, however, the Indian media - including LiveMint, Rediff and CNN IBN- had lost no opportunity to cover the efforts of their brave soldiers as they risked their lives, allowing the Indian and international public to see a politicized, one-sided story."

"Three days into the disaster, seasoned journalist Ms Burkha Dutt had the cheek to ask if the rescue mission would be a 'turning point for the army in Kashmir' on her show on NDTV, and a guest on Times Now stated that the Indian army stands 'vindicated' for the 60,000 thousand deaths in the valley mourned by those with an anti-Indian stance, because it had saved that number and more in the floods."

Nehia, Lasharie, (2014), has noted that, "the Indian government has come under scrutiny for *turning the calamity into a PR opportunity*, with the AF accused of attempting to seize the stage as the saviours of the Kashmiri people."

Shukla, Ajai, (2014), has highlighted that, "The insensitivity even took the form of taunting questions to Kashmiris about whether they should now learn to love the army that they criticised so much. Had TV channel editors warned off their half-baked correspondents, the army might have benefited enormously from public gratitude for its selfless work. Instead, there was seething anger on the streets of Srinagar at this crass and tactless milking of nationalism."

Sandipan Deb, (2014), countering the views that the 'Indian government turns Kashmir disaster into PR stunt,' has stated that, "the Indian AF have done a great job. The AF are supposed to be there, when we need them. We expect them to appear out of nowhere and fix issues that others have proved too incompetent or corrupt to do/ complete/ achieve. It's not only about the Kashmir floods, but every natural disaster that has struck India in the last many years, from Uttarakhand to the village on the outskirts of Pune."

"To help the Kashmir flood victims, frontline troops were pulled in. All normal anti terrorist operations more or less came to a halt. The 15 Corps headquartered in the Badami Bagh Cantonment in Srinagar had been completely focused on the relief operations. They had to be, because there seemed to be no one else around."

"There were also more than a hundred locations in the Valley where Indian troops were marooned. Their rations were running out. Their supplies were late. And they were the most

vital resources against terrorist intruders. They needed food, they needed diesel and kerosene."

"Today, it is time to salute that Unknown Soldier who's working without rest, for days and days, rescuing people, saving them from starvation and death. It is time to salute those unnamed soldiers who formed a human bridge across a roaring stream so that villagers could walk over their backs and reach the other side, to safety. They will not be getting any medals. It's part of their job, and they never think any way differently from that. They are our protectors. Let us hope that after the waters go down, at least some people in the Valley who have nurtured their grievances for so long, will look at the 'occupying forces' of the Indian State in a different light, at least for some time."

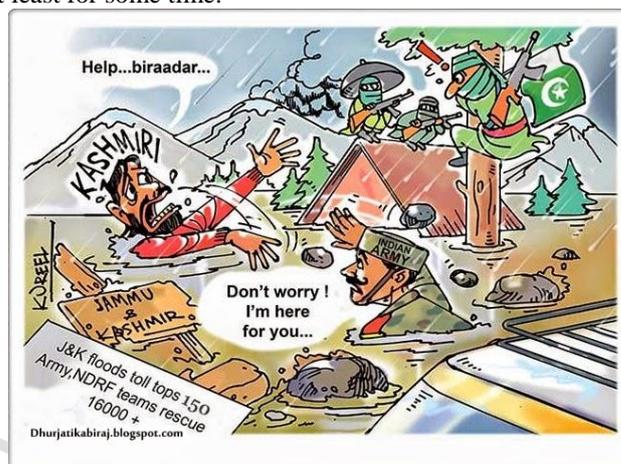


Figure 2

Fig 2 - This cartoon, retrieved from <https://plus.google.com/+DhurjatiKabirajOfficial/posts/Gr4fcLEnohN?sfcc=true>, Sep15, 2014 clearly depicts that at times of crises, the terrorist organisations in J&K, including the 'Hurriyat', were of no help to the common man. It was only the selfless service of the AF that reached out to help them, even though the AF personnel, themselves, were badly affected by the flood waters.

Ali, Basharat, (2014), has stated that, "Kashmir is battling the worst of times in its living memory. A flood that has inundated half of the valley is causing unimaginable devastation, yet the hyper-nationalist and jingoistic Indian media has made the so-called rescue operations by its AF the centre of its attention and coverage. 'Army and air force are risking their own lives to save lives in #JKfloods. Separatists who have only abused the fauj should feel chastened now,' tweeted the cheerleader of India's broadcast media Barkha Dutt. The prime time journalist has the shameless guts to ask questions and pose a serious face. The self-congratulatory media is all praise for the Indian army for rescuing its own people and sending them to safer places."

"NDTV and CNN IBN, India's two leading English news channels, have stooped to the lowest ebb and brought disgrace to the idea of journalism. Instead of focussing their attention to the relief and rescue, they have been constantly equating the actions of the AF with Kashmir's integration with India. NDTV on its prime time show, *The Buck Stops Here*, discussed the topic "Armed forces at heart of rescue - a turning point in Kashmir" where the panellists and moderator

were all praise for the AF and how their efforts would integrate Kashmir with India.”

“CNN IBN’s report titled “Kashmir floods: Defence forces’ heroics expose separatists, ‘intellectuals’” crossed all barriers of stupidity and absurdity. According to this report “the defence and security forces have emerged as the saviours of the people” and that the “hated Indian army is doing commendable job.” CNN IBN hopes that that the heroics of its AF will change the perception of the local Kashmiris, thereby explicitly giving its efforts a political colour. The Indian media, with their reporters, chopper-riding and taking aerial surveys, are busy issuing certificates to their AF and trying to absolve them of their war crimes in Kashmir.”

“The Indian media, through its continuing biased reportage of the catastrophe, has brought disgrace to journalism. It is bizarre and gross stupidity to think that such a public relations exercise will help India absolve itself of the crimes against humanity or really turn Kashmir into its *atoot ang* (internal part).”

Jayant Sriram, (2015), commenting on the Indian AF rescue efforts in Nepal (April 2015), has highlighted that, “reports about the Indian Army’s rescue operation has led to the accusation that Indian television crews were covering the disaster like a TV serial. He had quoted Mr Sanjay Thapa, a doctor in Kathmandu, saying ‘As the cameraman swept the camera inside the chopper all I could see was two journalists sitting inside. I was thinking, if you were able to go to that remote place then the least you should have done is take doctors and take food and medical supplies.’”

He had also noted that “the competition among the several Indian television crews assembled in Kathmandu to undertake trips with the Army was intense, and that the Army had decided not to take any more journalists on the expeditions since they were already receiving strong criticism. The predominant feeling in Kathmandu, especially as military efforts shifted from search and rescue to supplying relief material, was that *the media was simply getting in the way.*”

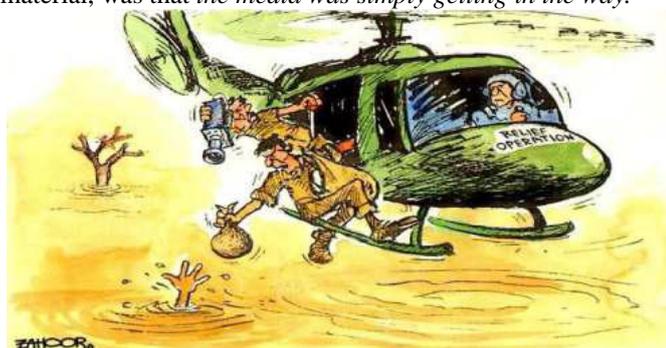


Figure 3

Fig 3 - This cartoon, Featured in the Editorial & Opinion pages of The Express Tribune - September 13, 2014, retrieved from page 150 of ‘Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society’ <http://www.jkccs.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Occupation-Hazard-JKCCS.pdf>, depicts the insensitive nature of reporting by the media. While the drowning person needs to be rescued, he is being offered relief material and the journalist is intent on photographing the same. Thereby, highlighting the insensitive approach of the Media in spite of the AF having reached the victim and are in a position to rescue him.

“What was created, therefore, was a situation in which *TV journalists inadvertently became embedded reporters.* As more and more access was granted by the Indian AF, there followed a series of excited reports, about how the Indian Army was rescuing and giving help to thousands of people in remote areas. The *accusation grew that television crews were delighting in the destruction they saw and were covering the disaster like a TV serial.* There was no objectivity and by the end of the week several local dailies and websites were reporting that it was actually the Nepal Army that had been making the majority of rescues, simply because they knew the terrain better.”

“A television reporter who was in Nepal, speaking to *The Hindu* on condition of anonymity, admitted that the backlash was the result of a ‘*PR experiment gone wrong.* There were too many journalists who kept making trips on the Army choppers and that was not good. I also got the sense last week that because of all this coverage, many Nepalis had started feeling that India is acting like some sort of big brother,’ he said.”

This again highlighted the issue of the India troops being disheartened that their sincere and selfless efforts had not been correctly recognised, due to the irresponsible and immature media coverage.

Soutik Biswas, (May9, 2015), has highlighted that, “narratives of disasters can easily go awry and make the affected people angry. So it seems to have been the case with the Indian media and its coverage of the devastating Nepal earthquake. The Indian media has been facing a lot of criticism for its coverage of the tragedy.”

“Very early, the hashtag, ‘#GoHomeIndianMedia’, became a top social media trend in Nepal with tens of thousands of tweets on the subject. People complained that the Indian media coverage had been insensitive and jingoistic, among other things.” He has quoted a Nepali, Ms Sunita Shakya, as saying, “Your media and media personnel are acting like they are shooting some kind of family serials. If your media person can reach to the places where the relief supplies have not reached, at this time of crisis can't they take a first-aid kit or some food supplies with them as well?”

“There were many sorry stories of how the Indian media - mainly the news channels - had covered the quake. A reporter seized a wounded survivor and paraded her in front of the cameras rather than putting some cloth to stop the bleeding. Another one asked a woman whose only son was buried under a wreck, “How do you feel?” Yet another kept asking rescue workers what technology they were using at work. In a quake-hit village, a reporter worked up a veritable hysteria, asking affected villagers what their government was actually doing for them. India’s former minister Mr Shashi Tharoor commented that, ‘*Our media continues to embarrass and dismay India.*’”

“To be true, nobody in Nepal denied that India’s response to the tragedy had been fleet-footed and enormously helpful. It had also rightfully earned a lot of praise. India was leading the search-and-rescue efforts with 704 personnel on the ground, followed by China (168), Bangladesh (140) and the US (120).”

“There had been discontent over the surprising access that Indian media were getting on the relief sorties being run by the

Indian air force planes. Many in Nepal believe that the air force was more interested in rescuing stranded Indians rather than helping evacuate quake affected people.”

“There were allegations that the air force planes had virtually taken control of the airport, thus slowing down other international aid efforts. Also many in Nepal felt that the "outsized" coverage of the Indian effort had put to shade heroic efforts made by the Nepalese Army, its armed police and the local officials who have tried their best to work in very difficult circumstances.”

“The Nepalese are used to watching shrill and jingoistic prime time talk shows on some Indian news channels usually against Pakistan. Suddenly, with scores of Indian TV reporters flooding Nepal in the aftermath of the quake, the Nepalese found themselves at the receiving end of similar jingoism. One biting cartoon showed a TV reporter in the pocket of a gleeful Indian soldier posing with a box screaming Aid for Nepal. ‘The shrillness, jingoism, exaggerations, boorishness and sometimes mistakes in coverage have rankled the host community,’ Kanak Mani Dixit, editor of the respected Himal South Aasian magazine, wrote. Also, many said that Indian media's overdependence on access-based journalism meant that a disproportionate amount of coverage often ends up on eulogising how their government and its agencies handle crises - *there was similar criticism of the media's coverage of flood-affected people in the Kashmir Valley a year ago.*”

"The mainly social media backlash in Nepal does point to an irritation of local people with the way their tragedy has been covered by India," said Kanak Mani Dixit. "It is possibly time now for India's news channel to introspect and give some due respect to the host country."

Prashar, Utpal, (2015), has highlighted that, “India was the first country to rush aid to Nepal after a 7.9-magnitude quake on April 25, 2015 left more than 7,200 people dead and a trail of destruction of devastated infrastructure across the country and left tens of thousands displaced. While rescue effort has been praised, media’s wall-to-wall coverage of the calamity and that of the relief operation seem to have left a bitter aftertaste among Nepalis.”

“Indian media’s alleged insensitive and biased coverage of Nepal earthquake has come in for severe criticism, with ‘#GoHomeIndianMedia’ hashtag trending actively on Twitter. People in Nepal took to social media in droves to complain about what they described as the Indian media’s “insensitive” reportage. More than 128,000 tweets on a single day complained about and debated Indian press’s handling of Nepal’s worst quake in 80 years. Twitterati accused the Indian media of being insensitive to survivors, asking them irrelevant questions such as "How are you feeling?" and not helping those needing immediate medical aid. Many tweets reminded the Indian media that Nepal is a sovereign country and not a ‘satellite state’.”

“Many contended the Indian media was treating its coverage of the quake and its victims as a public relations exercise on behalf of the government in Delhi. "Some Nepalis, not all, feel Indian media is a bit patronising in their attitude and that is perhaps why such sentiments are being expressed. That is how a section of Nepali media also feels," said Kunda Dixit, a veteran journalist and editor of Nepali Times. There is a feeling among Nepalese that the

Indian media is only highlighting the plight of Indians in Nepal and rescue efforts by teams from the Indian military and the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF).”

Tuosto, Kylie, (2008), states that, ‘If journalists abandon the pursuit of objective truth in favor of relativized truths grounded in personal experience and edited for audience consumption, then who will provide the audience with that necessary degree of objectivity?’

IV. METHODOLOGY

The adverse effects of biased, irresponsible, insensitive reporting by the media, on the morale of the AF personnel has been studied and analysed by receiving replies to questionnaire (J&K Floods), conducting interviews with concerned officials, study of official records and a review of relevant literature available on this subject, both online and in the print media.

V. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

J&K Floods (2014). Two sets of Questionnaires were prepared, Part I for the victims and Part II for the officials who had participated in this operation. 130 copies of Questionnaire (Part I) were distributed to the victims and 30 copies of the Questionnaire (Part II) were distributed to various Officials. A total of 96 (87 legible) responses were received from victims and 22 (19 legible) from officials. An analysis of these responses to the issues relevant to the Research Topic (Need for Objective and Responsible Media Reporting of the Actions of Armed Forces in Managing National Disasters) is covered below.

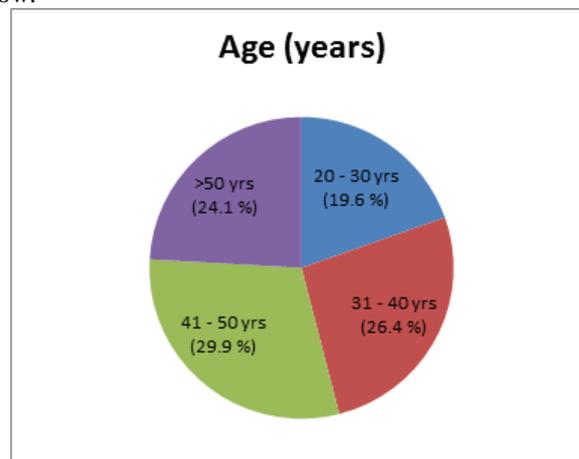


Table 1: Age Profile of the Victims (87)

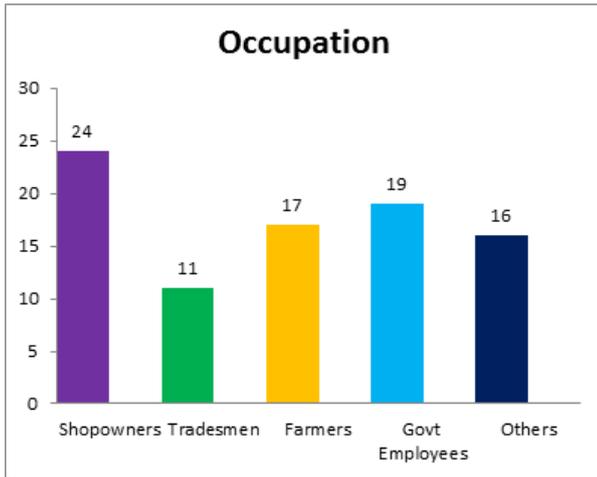


Table 2: Occupation of the Victims (87)

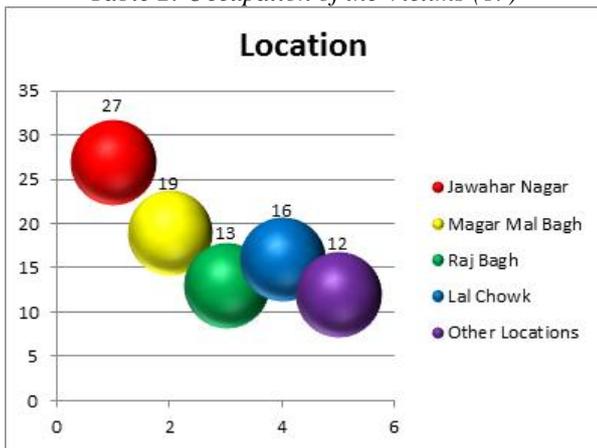


Table 3: Location of the Victims (87)

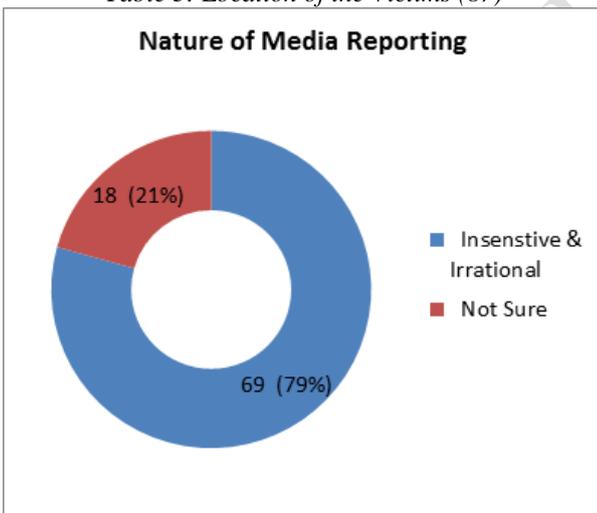


Table 4: Response of Victims (87)

An Analysis of the Response of the Victims (87 no) shows that considering that they have been from a large cross-section of age groups, having different and diverse occupations and located in various areas of the disaster zone, 79% of them had noticed that the reporting of the media had been insensitive and irrational; belittling the enormous good work done by the AF.

SNo	Service	Numbers	%
1.	Civil (State/Central) Administration	05	26

2.	Police/Para Military Forces	04	21
3.	Armed Forces	06	32
4.	Prominent Citizens	03	16
5.	Others	01	05
	Total	19	100

Table 5: Details of Officials from whom legible responses were received

All 19 respondents have stated that the reporting by the National media should have been more rational, responsible & objective. The goodwill gained by the AF in their prompt rescue and relief operations was greatly compromised by the jingoistic, insensitive and, at times, heartless, reporting.

Journalists were permitted by the Government to travel along with rescue teams of the AF, in their boats and helicopters.

In a large no. of cases the reporting done by these journalists, both, in J&K and Nepal, dramatised the tragic state of affairs and belittled the plight of the victims who were fighting for survival. This real time and immediate reporting, without any editing by senior journalists, had a very strong effect on the local populace and also the whole nation.

Though the local population and administration was all praise for the good work done by the AF, this irresponsible reporting dampened the hard work put in by the AF personnel.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Embedded journalism is a good and worthwhile concept to enable viewers to get an immediate and firsthand report of the 'activities at the front'. However, this reporting must keep the sensitivities of the situation and the local populace foremost in mind. The victims should be shown in a very human and sympathetic manner, rather than dramatising their plight.

The reporting should portray a correct and objective picture of the work being done by the rescue and relief agencies. They are always doing their job in a very selfless manner and want only that to be projected. There is no one-upmanship or 'politics' involved in their efforts. They do their duty in the most efficient, effective and humane manner, and then retire for the They complete their days work and retire at night only to be back at the critical areas at the break of dawn. The media needs to report their work accordingly, without any political colouring.

The most important motivating factor for the AF is their 'Izzat' and the 'Izzat' of their comrades, units and subunits. They are trained for teamwork and do not look for any personal glory or awards. The political leaders, senior officials and other policy makers need to pay close attention to these issues and do everything to maintain this 'Izzat' and morale of the AF at the highest level. The National media has a very important role to play in this entire scenario.

VII. CONCLUSION

From the above research it is evident that the concept of embedded journalism, though having its own advantages, if not tightly monitored, can become counterproductive. The

political, AF and bureaucratic leaders, at the highest echelons, need to be aware of this threat and take all necessary steps to guard against the same. Considering the latest technology enabling real-time media reporting, it is very important that such journalists report in a fair, objective, truthful and mature manner keeping the sensitivity of the delicate situation, foremost in mind. This is what the AF want. Else the good work of the AF and the entire Government machinery loses its sheen, as has been noticed in the case of the Kashmir Floods of 2014 and the Nepal Earthquake of 2015.

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